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Last Studies





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Last Studies

By

Hubert Crackanthorpe

Author of
“Sentimental Studies,” “Wreckage,”
“Vignettes,” &c.

With a Poem by Stopford A. Brooke, and
an Appreciation by Henry James

London
William Heinemann

1897

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*To the loyal friends of my beloved son,
who saw in the unfolding flower of his
manhood a renewal of the bright promise
of his early youth, I dedicate, for an
abiding remembrance, these last fragments
of his interrupted work*

Blanche Alethea Crackanithorpe



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*HUBERT, who loved the country and the town,
Has left his friends ; and England sees no more
The young, slight figure musing on the down,
Nor France his quiet eyes, that o'er and o'er
Travelled her landscape, shaping it so well.*

*His joys were there, but pity for mankind
Drew him where surging cities moved his soul :
He wrote of men and women, wrecked, and pined
With bitter sorrow ; and the misery stole
Into his life till he bade life farewell.*

*Pity he could not stay, for he was true,
Tender and chivalrous, and without spot ;
Loving things great and good, and love like dew
Fell from his heart on those that loved him not ;
But those who loved him knew that he loved well.*

*Too rough his sea, too dark its angry tides !
Things of a day are we ; shadows that move
The lands of shadow ; but, where he abides,
Time is no more ; and that great substance, Love,
Is shadowless. And yet, we grieve. Farewell.*

STOPFORD A. BROOKE



HUBERT CRACKANTHORPE

HUBERT CRACKANTHORPE, some months before his death, took part in a demonstration of the literary spirit which, however modest its object, singularly attained its mark. He joined forces with two other young men of letters, to offer, with a brief but emphasized compliment, to an older writer with whose work the three had been impressed, a substantial token of esteem. The older writer, the more surprised and touched as he was singularly unused to such approaches, found himself, by his emotion on this occasion, brought so much closer to each participant as to have on the spot the sense of a fresh interest, a curiosity quickened and warmed. Nothing could appeal to him more—if only to arrive at the luxury of a perception of what they might have appreciated in the results of his endeavour—than to

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gather from a nearer view what they too were doing and intending, and see, in short, what figure, in other work, might be made by conceptions akin to those to which, in his own way, he had obscurely sacrificed. He almost dreamed, for a fleeting hour, of recognizing in this process of his own, if he might call it such, a source of direct influence ; almost dreamed of tasting that purest pleasure the artist can know, the sight of an impulse, an emulation communicated, of sympathy, of intellectual assent literally fructifying and putting forth. This was an experience so promising that it took at first perhaps too much for granted, overlooked, at any rate, the inevitable frustrations of time. One of the first effects of it could only be an increase of the pleasanter parts, the whole reckless relish, of responsibility. That, in turn, intensified, simplified the prospect and, as what Hubert Crackanthorpe in especial had most strikingly offered was the generosity of his youth, brushed away any visions of limits or lapses. There remained the sense of a relation formed and from which there was much more to come ;

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but before scarce anything could come, arrived, with violence, the young man's sudden death, anticipating opportunities and bringing with it specific regrets. So it became a question of reading into what he had done and intended other things still than symptoms of an influence and softly-reflected lights. The complete, or at any rate the more direct, impression of him, disengaging and rounding itself, gave him a physiognomy the more attaching that it would be, beyond doubt, by no means easy to reproduce. This physiognomy owes something at present, none the less, quite as surely to that fortune of early distinction which has never descended without enhancing the image upon the aspiring, the commencing worker. Hubert Crackanthorpe's death, for those who knew him, could only give him more meaning and, as I may say, more life—something that, for the subject, in especial, of the demonstration I have mentioned, could constitute more of a tie. Such a memory seemed offered, in its vivid contraction, instead of the longer chance.

To read over what he has left—four small

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volumes—is to be freshly struck with the peculiar degree in which, in his imagination, in his tone, an almost extreme maturity is mingled with an equally unmistakable betrayal of the fewness of his years and—I scarce know what to call it but—the juvenility of his candour. That is the aspect that is difficult to render, so much does it constitute his troubled individual note—a note so rare in England, in the present generation, among tellers of tales, that the critic is conscious of no frequent exercise, no acquired suppleness, in trying to fix it. There is of course a very eminent case in which, in somewhat altered proportions, the mixture I allude to, the air of anticipated experience, shines out with a great light; but no note, in that extraordinary composition, could well be less to be spoken of as troubled. No element assuredly in the artistic temperament of Mr. Rudyard Kipling but operates with the ease and exactitude of an alarm-clock set to the hour. For the rest, in the field of fiction, is what we are mainly conscious of not, on the whole, a good deal more the crudity of old hands

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than the antiquity of new? We seem to see in Hubert Crackanthurpe not only a very interesting, but a positively touching case of what may be called reaction against an experience of puerilities judged, frankly, inane, and a proportionate search, on his own responsibility and his own ground, for some artistic way of marking the force of the reaction. Something in his pages appears to tell us that he entertained this personal vision of a straight, short course with a lively intensity, a lucidity enhanced, as we look back, by his comparatively unassisted and isolated state. What he had his fancy of attempting he had to work out for himself, in a public air but scantily charged with aids to any independence of conventions—thin as conventions had been worn; and to work out as a point of honour, an act of artistic probity, an expression adjusted to his own free sense of life, to a hundred things with which the unprejudiced observer could be confronted and surrounded. It was a marked example of the undeliberating gallantry that was discernibly latent in him—a preference for some performance, in what-

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ever line, that should be akin to acting for himself. To have known him, however little, was to decline to wonder perhaps how a boyishness superficially so vivid could bend itself to this particular vehicle, feel the reality of the thousand bribes to pessimism, see as salient the side of life that is neither miraculous coincidence, nor hairbreadth escape, nor simplified sentiment, nor ten thousand a year. Too great a surprise would indeed have been no compliment to his wit, and the question of course connects itself with something that is every man's secret and mystery and of which no one has an account to render, the incalculable angle at which experience may strike, the vision, the impression of life that may impose itself. These things are what they are made by a thousand influences with which summary criticism, even in its most complacent hours, is lucky not to be obliged to pick a quarrel. The author of *Sentimental Studies* was so fond of movement and sport, of the open air of life and of the idea of immediate, easy, "healthy" adventure, that his natural vocation might have seemed rather a long ride away into a world of

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exhilarating exposure, of merely material romance.

This only proves that our individual perception of human accidents insists on its perversities and may even disconcert our friends ; and suggests, moreover, that Crackanthorpe's was probably in some degree determined by a prompt suspicion of the superior interest, for the artistic purpose, of almost anything that is not grossly obvious. Was not the grossly obvious, more or less, what he had inevitably been brought up to —the pleasant furniture of an easy, happy young English life, the public school and the university, the prosperous society, the convenient chances, the refined professions, the placid assumptions, the view of the world as through rose-coloured gauze that might, after all, have suffocating properties ? Reality and romance rose before him equally as, in fact, in their essence, unmuffled and undomesticated ; above all as latent in the question, always a challenge for a keen literary spirit, of difficulty of execution. He had an almost precocious glimpse of the charm of the technical problem, and, as I have hinted, it could

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fall in with his young dream of directness and firmness to try to make his own one of the neglected or unappreciated forms—an experiment both modest and resolute, as one now looks back, in the light of the absence, near at hand at least, of significant examples and distinguished successes. What appealed to him was the situation that asked for a certain fineness of art and that could best be presented in a kind of foreshortened picture : the possibilities of some phase, in especial, of a thoroughly personal relation, a relation the better the more intimate and demanding, for objective intensity, some degree of composition and reduction. The short tale as we call it for convenience, though the latter member of the term rather begs the question, may be, like the long one, mainly of two sorts : the chain of items, figures in a kind of sum—one of the simple rules—of movement, added up as on a school-boy's slate and with the correct total and its little flourish constituting the finish and accounting for the effect ; or else it may be an effort preferably pictorial, a portrait of conditions, an attempt to summarize and compress for purposes of

presentation, to "render" even, if possible, for purposes of expression. This latter is the form that may be spoken of as enjoying among us all no more general favour than such as, in several French hands, it may have owed to several rare successes. The French hands, it is clear, had, to Hubert Crackan thorpe, conveyed no empty message ; two or three, visibly, had led him to make his reflections and to attempt to profit seriously by the moral they pointed. On a close view, to-day, there is something almost pathetic in the innocent, the almost artless pluck of his eager response. What Maupassant, strong master, in particular had done, filled him with an ideal of penetration and concision ; the reader places himself easily at the point of view for measuring here a direct coercion and perhaps even an extravagant surrender. But he likes the surrender for its blind good faith. The lesson was so large that we may excuse in the pupil a touch too much of solemnity. In his imaginative reaction against the smug and superficial he formed, at any rate, a conception of special chances, caught a glimpse of what, in the

deep, dark London for instance, the smug and superficial had left unfathomed and untouched. He was beset, on these lines, I gather, with a somewhat humiliated sense of the way Paris, cruel and tragic, Paris with its abounding life and death of every sort, has, as a subject, been royally ransacked, and of what experiments, in the interest of neglected variety, might spring from our uglier and more brutal Bohemia.

This eye for the Bohemian panorama was too fresh to be as searching as he might fondly hope, but it helped three or four of his tales to arrive at a brief, hard, controlled intensity, an excellent felicity of dreariness. The best of these small things, however, are not those of the flare of the Strand, of the hustle of the London pavement and the rebound of the gaslight from the wet ; to the appetite of the artist in him what, apparently, had most savour was the sweetness and the sadness, above all in France, of strong country aspects, of the sharp, homely, sunny foreignness of simple, local folk and out-of-the-way places. A few such aspects he has happily played with in the half-

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dozen vivid little chapters that accompany *Sentimental Studies*, each of the briefest, but each, by studied selection and compression—*The White Maize*, *Saint-Pé*, *Etienne Matto*, *Gaston Lalanne's Child*—a small, sharp, bright picture. In this line, had he lived, he would have gone, I suspect, much further: he is at his best in the absolutely episodic, reaching his safest limits in such a happy intelligence of the artistic essential as *Battledore and Shuttlecock*—in which, most, unless it be also in *Trevor Perkins*, the effect aimed at is seized and rounded, the touch too much, the touch *beside* the matter above all, exactly avoided. In the tiny collection of “Vignettes” he sounds again the note of his joy in the French country and in working the impression down to a few square inches of water-colour, framed, as it were, with a narrow line and suspended on a quiet wall. “All day an intense impression”—in the Basque country—“of lusty sunlight, of quivering golden green . . . a long, white road that dazzles, between its rustling dark-green walls; blue brawling rivers; swelling upland meadows, flower-thronged, luscious with tall, cool grass;

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the shepherd's thin-toned pipe ; the ragged flocks, blocking the road, cropping at the hedge-rows as they hurry on towards the mountains ; the slow, streaming teams of jangling mules—wine-carriers, coming from Spain ; through dank, cobbled village streets, where the pigs pant their bellies in the roadway, and the sandal-makers flatten the hemp before their doors ; and then, out again into the lusty sunlight, along the straight powdery road that dazzles ahead interminably towards a mysterious, hazy horizon, where the land melts into the sky."

To allude to the "joy" of most of his pages, however, is to come back rather to the anomaly, as I at first felt it, of what was absent from these few and broken experiments, to the predominance of the consciousness of the cruelty of life, the expression, from volume to volume, of the deep insecurity of things ; and to come back, as well, to my own slight mystification at the irreconcilability of his bright, tender type, as it were, and his persistently melancholy tone —from which I sought an issue in the easy supposition that nothing is more frequent in

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clever young men than a premature attitude and a precipitate irony, and that this member of his generation differed from many others, those especially of the prose pen, only in the degree of his emphasis and his finish. His production was scant, his personality modest, and one argued, all round, on but a handful of signs. That was the case at least till suddenly, in the light of his death, the whole proportion and perspective appeared so to alter that friendly remembrance, moving backward, dropped the mere explanation of juvenility of posture and left it to merge itself, with compunction, in the thought of instincts and fears of a deeper colour—left it to give way, as if for reparation, to his own young vision of fate.

HENRY JAMES.



**ANTHONY GARSTIN'S
COURTSHIP**



ANTHONY GARSTIN'S COURTSHIP

I

A STAMPEDE of huddled sheep, wildly scampering over the slaty shingle, emerged from the leaden mist that muffled the fell-top, and a shrill shepherd's whistle broke the damp stillness of the air. And presently a man's figure appeared, following the sheep down the hillside. He halted a moment to whistle-curly to his two dogs, who, laying back their ears, chased the sheep at top-speed beyond the brow; then, his hands deep in his pockets, he strode vigorously forward. A streak of white smoke from a toiling train was creeping silently across the distance:

I.

B

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the great, grey, desolate undulations of treeless country showed no other sign of life.

The sheep hurried in single file along a tiny track worn threadbare amid the brown, lumpy grass: and, as the man came round the mountain's shoulder, a narrow valley opened out beneath him—a scanty patch-work of green fields, and, here and there, a whitewashed farm, flanked by a dark cluster of sheltering trees.

The man walked with a loose, swinging gait. His figure was spare and angular: he wore a battered, black felt hat and clumsy, iron-bound boots: his clothes were dingy from long exposure to the weather. He had close-set, insignificant eyes, much wrinkled, and stubbly eyebrows streaked with grey. His mouth was close-shaven, and drawn by his abstraction into hard and taciturn lines; beneath his chin bristled an unkempt fringe of sandy-coloured hair.

When he reached the foot of the fell, the

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twilight was already blurring the distance. The sheep scurried, with a noisy rustling, across a flat, swampy stretch, over-grown with rushes, while the dogs headed them towards a gap in a low, ragged wall built of loosely-heaped boulders. The man swung the gate to after them, and waited, whistling peremptorily, recalling the dogs. A moment later, the animals re-appeared, cringing as they crawled through the bars of the gate. He kicked out at them contemptuously, and mounting a stone stile a few yards further up the road, dropped into a narrow lane.

Presently, as he passed a row of lighted windows, he heard a voice call to him. He stopped, and perceived a crooked, white-bearded figure, wearing clerical clothes, standing in the garden gateway.

"Good-evening, Anthony. A raw evening this."

"Ay, Mr. Blencarn, it 's a bit frittish," he answered. "I've jest bin gittin' a few lambs off t' fell. I hope ye're keepin' fairly, an'

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Miss Rosa too." He spoke briefly, with a loud, spontaneous cordiality.

"Thank ye, Anthony, thank ye. Rosa 's down at the church, playing over the hymns for to-morrow. How 's Mrs. Garstin ?"

"Nicely, thank ye, Mr. Blencarn. She 's wonderful active, is mother."

"Well, good-night to ye, Anthony," said the old man, clicking the gate.

"Good-night, Mr. Blencarn," he called back.

A few minutes later the twinkling lights of the village came in sight, and from within the sombre form of the square-towered church, looming by the roadside, the slow, solemn strains of the organ floated out on the evening air. Anthony lightened his tread: then paused, listening; but, presently, becoming aware that a man stood, listening also, on the bridge some few yards distant, he moved forward again. Slackening his pace, as he approached, he eyed the figure keenly; but the man paid no heed to him,

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remaining, with his back turned, gazing over the parapet into the dark, gurgling stream.

Anthony trudged along the empty village street, past the gleaming squares of ruddy gold, starting on either side out of the darkness. Now and then he looked furtively backwards. The straight open road lay behind him, glimmering wanly : the organ seemed to have ceased : the figure on the bridge had left the parapet, and appeared to be moving away towards the church. Anthony halted, watching it till it had disappeared into the blackness beneath the churchyard trees. Then, after a moment's hesitation, he left the road, and mounted an upland meadow towards his mother's farm.

It was a bare, oblong house. In front, a whitewashed porch, and a narrow garden-plot, enclosed by a low iron railing, were dimly discernible : behind, the steep fell-side loomed like a monstrous, mysterious curtain hung across the night. He passed round the back into the twilight of a wide yard, cobbled

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and partially grass-grown, vaguely flanked by the shadowy outlines of long, low farm-buildings. All was wrapped in darkness: somewhere overhead a bat fluttered, darting its puny scream.

Inside, a blazing peat-fire scattered capering shadows across the smooth, stone floor, flickered among the dim rows of hams suspended from the ceiling and on the panelled cupboards of dark, glistening oak. A servant-girl, spreading the cloth for supper, clattered her clogs in and out of the kitchen: old Mrs. Garstin was stooping before the hearth, tremulously turning some girdle-cakes that lay roasting in the embers.

At the sound of Anthony's heavy tread in the passage, she rose, glancing sharply at the clock above the chimney-piece. She was a heavy-built woman, upright, stalwart almost, despite her years. Her face was gaunt and sallow; deep wrinkles accentuated the hardness of her features. She wore a black widow's cap above her iron-grey

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hair, gold-rimmed spectacles, and a soiled, chequered apron.

"Ye're varra late, Tony," she remarked querulously.

He unloosened his woollen neckerchief, and when he had hung it methodically with his hat behind the door, answered :

"'Twas terrible thick on t' fell-top, an' them two bitches be that senseless."

She caught his sleeve, and, through her spectacles, suspiciously scrutinized his face.

"Ye did na meet wi' Rosa Blencarn ?"

"Nay, she was in church, hymn-playin', wi' Luke Stock hangin' roond door," he retorted bitterly, rebuffing her with rough impatience.

She moved away, nodding sententiously to herself. They began supper : neither spoke : Anthony sat slowly stirring his tea, and staring moodily into the flames : the bacon on his plate lay untouched. From time to time his mother, laying down her knife and fork, looked across at him in

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unconcealed asperity, pursing her wide, ungainly mouth. At last, abruptly setting down her cup, she broke out :

"I wonder ye hav'na mare pride, Tony. For hoo lang are ye goin' t' continue settin' mopin' and broodin' like a seck sheep? Ye'll jest mak yesself ill, an' then I reckon what ye'll prove satisfied. Ay, but I wonder ye hav'na more pride."

But he made no answer, remaining unmoved, as if he had not heard.

Presently, half to himself, without raising his eyes, he murmured :

"Luke be goin' South, Monday."

"Well, ye canna tak' oop wi' his leavin's anyways. It hasna coom t' that, has it? Ye doan't intend settin' all t' parish a laughin' at ye a second occasion?"

He flushed dully, and bending over his plate, mechanically began his supper.

"Wa dang it," he broke out a minute later, "d'ye think I heed the cacklin' o' fifty parishes? Na, not I," and, with a short,

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grim laugh, he brought his fist down heavily on the oak table.

"Ye're daft, Tony," the old woman blurted.

"Daft or na daft, I tell ye this, mother, that I be forty-six year o' age this back-end, and there be some things I will na listen to. Rosa Blencarn's bonny enough for me."

"Ay, bonny enough—I've na patience wi' ye. Bonny enough—tricked oot in her furbelows, gallivantin' wi' every royster fra Pe'rih. Bonny enough—that be all ye think on. She's bin a proper parson's niece—the giddy, feckless creature, an she'd mak' ye a proper sort o' wife, Tony Garstin, ye great, fond booby."

She pushed back her chair, and, hurriedly clattering the crockery, began to clear away the supper.

"T' hoose be mine, t' Lord be praised," she continued in a loud, hard voice, "an' as long as he spare me, Tony, I'll na see Rosa Blencarn set foot inside it."

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Anthony scowled, without replying, and drew his chair to the hearth. His mother bustled about the room behind him. After a while she asked :

“ Did ye pen t' lambs in t' back field ? ”

“ Na, they're in Hullam bottom,” he answered curtly.

The door closed behind her, and by and by he could hear her moving overhead. Meditatively blinking, he filled his pipe clumsily, and pulling a crumpled newspaper from his pocket, sat on over the smouldering fire, reading and stolidly puffing.

II

THE music rolled through the dark, empty church. The last, leaden flicker of daylight glimmered in through the pointed windows, and beyond the level rows of dusky pews, tenanted only by a litter of prayer-books, two guttering candles revealed the organ pipes, and the young girl's swaying figure.

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She played vigorously. Once or twice the tune stumbled, and she recovered it impatiently, bending over the key-board, showily flourishing her wrists as she touched the stops. She was bare-headed (her hat and cloak lay beside her on a stool). She had fair, fluffy hair, cut short behind her neck; large, round eyes, heightened by a fringe of dark lashes; rough, ruddy cheeks, and a rosy, full-lipped, unstable mouth. She was dressed quite simply, in a black, close-fitting bodice, a little frayed at the sleeves. Her hands and neck were coarsely fashioned: her comeliness was brawny, literal, unfinished, as it were.

When at last the ponderous chords of the Amen faded slowly into the twilight, flushed, breathing a little quickly, she paused, listening to the stillness of the church. Presently a small boy emerged from behind the organ.

"Good-evenin', Miss Rosa," he called, trotting briskly away down the aisle.

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"Good-night, Robert," she answered, absently.

After a while, with an impatient gesture, as if to shake some importunate thought from her mind, she rose abruptly, pinned on her hat, threw her cloak round her shoulders, blew out the candles, and groped her way through the church, towards the half-open door. As she hurried along the narrow pathway that led across the churchyard, of a sudden, a figure started out of the blackness.

"Who's that?" she cried, in a loud, frightened voice.

A man's uneasy laugh answered her.

"It's only me, Rosa. I didna think t' scare ye. I've bin waitin' for ye, this hoor past."

She made no reply, but quickened her pace. He strode on beside her.

"I'm off, Monday, ye know," he continued. And, as she said nothing,

"Will ye na stop jest a minnit? I'd like

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t' speak a few words wi' ye before I go, an to-morrow I hev t' git over t' Scarsdale betimes," he persisted.

"I don't want t' speak wi' ye: I don't want ever to see ye agin. I jest hate the sight o' ye." She spoke with a vehement, concentrated hoarseness.

"Nay, but ye must listen to me. I will na be put off wi' fratchin speeches."

And gripping her arm, he forced her to stop.

"Loose me, ye great beast," she broke out.

"I'll na hould ye, if ye'll jest stand quiet-like. I meant t' speak fair t' ye, Rosa."

They stood at a bend in the road, face to face, quite close together. Behind his burly form stretched the dimness of a grey, ghostly field.

"What is't ye hev to say to me? Hev done wi' it quick," she said sullenly.

"It be jest this, Rosa," he began with

dogged gravity. “I want t’ tell ye that ef any trouble comes t’ ye after I’m gone—ye know t’ what I refer—I want t’ tell ye that I’m prepared t’ act square by ye. I’ve written out on an envelope my address in London. Luke Stock, care o’ Purcell & Co., Smithfield Market, London.”

“Ye’re a bad, sinful man. I jest hate t’ sight o’ ye. I wish ye were dead.”

“Ay, but I reckon what ye’d ha best thought o’ that before. Ye’ve changed yer whistle considerably since Tuesday. Nay, hould on,” he added, as she struggled to push past him. “Here’s t’ envelope.”

She snatched the paper, and tore it passionately, scattering the fragments on to the road. When she had finished, he burst out angrily :

“Ye cussed, unreasonable fool.”

“Let me pass, ef ye’ve nought mare t’ say,” she cried.

“Nay, I’ll na part wi’ ye this fashion. Ye can speak soft enough when ye choose.”

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And seizing her shoulders, he forced her backwards against the wall.

"Ye do look fine, an' na mistake, when ye're jest ablaze wi' ragin'," he laughed bluntly, lowering his face to hers.

"Loose me, loose me, ye great coward," she gasped, striving to free her arms.

Holding her fast, he expostulated :

"Coom, Rosa, can we na part friends?"

"Part friends, indeed," she retorted bitterly. "Friends wi' the likes o' you. What d'ye tak me for? Let me git home, I tell ye. An' please God I'll never set eyes on ye again. I hate t' sight o' ye."

"Be off wi' ye, then," he answered, pushing her roughly back into the road. "Be off wi' ye, ye silly. Ye canna say I hav na spak fair t' ye, an', by goom, ye'll na see me shally-wallyin this fashion agin. Be off wi' ye: ye can jest shift for yerself, since ye canna keep a civil tongue in yer head."

The girl, catching at her breath, stood as

if dazed, watching his retreating figure ; then starting forward at a run, disappeared up the hill, into the darkness.

III

OLD Mr. Blencarn concluded his husky sermon. The scanty congregation, who had been sitting, stolidly immobile in their stiff, Sunday clothes, shuffled to their feet, and the pewful of school children, in clamorous chorus, intoned the final hymn. Anthony stood near the organ, absently contemplating, while the rude melody resounded through the church, Rosa's deft manipulation of the key-board. The rugged lines of his face were relaxed to a vacant, thoughtful limpness, that aged his expression not a little : now and then, as if for reference, he glanced questioningly at the girl's profile.

A few minutes later the service was over, and the congregation sauntered out down the aisle. A gawky group of men remained

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loitering by the church door : one of them called to Anthony ; but, nodding curtly, he passed on, and strode away down the road, across the grey upland meadows, towards home. As soon as he had breasted the hill, however, and was no longer visible from below, he turned abruptly to the left, along a small, swampy hollow, till he had reached the lane that led down from the fellside.

He clambered over a rugged, moss-grown wall, and stood, gazing expectantly down the dark, disused roadway ; then, after a moment's hesitation, perceiving nobody, seated himself beneath the wall, on a projecting slab of stone.

Overhead hung a sombre, drifting sky. A gusty wind rollicked down from the fell—huge masses of chilly grey, stripped of the last night's mist. A few dead leaves fluttered over the stones, and from off the fellside there floated the plaintive, quavering rumour of many bleating sheep.

Before long, he caught sight of two figures

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coming towards him, slowly climbing the hill. He sat awaiting their approach, fidgeting with his sandy beard, and abstractedly grinding the ground beneath his heel. At the brow they halted : plunging his hands deep into his pockets, he strolled sheepishly towards them.

"Ah ! good day t' ye, Anthony," called the old man, in a shrill, breathless voice. "'Tis a long hill, an' my legs are not what they were. Time was when I'd think nought o' a whole day's tramp on t' fells. Ay, I'm gittin' feeble, Anthony, that's what 'tis. And if Rosa here wasn't the great, strong lass she is, I don't know how her old uncle 'd manage ;" and he turned to the girl with a proud, tremulous smile.

"Will ye tak my arm a bit, Mr. Blencarn ? Miss Rosa 'll be tired, likely," Anthony asked.

"Nay, Mr. Garstin, but I can manage nicely," the girl interrupted sharply.

Anthony looked up at her as she spoke.

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She wore a straw hat, trimmed with crimson velvet, and a black, fur-edged cape, that seemed to set off mightily the fine whiteness of her neck. Her large, dark eyes were fixed upon him. He shifted his feet uneasily, and dropped his glance.

She linked her uncle's arm in hers, and the three moved slowly forward. Old Mr. Blencarn walked with difficulty, pausing at intervals for breath. Anthony, his eyes bent on the ground, sauntered beside him, clumsily kicking at the cobbles that lay in his path.

When they reached the vicarage gate, the old man asked him to come inside.

"Not jest now, thank ye, Mr. Blencarn. I've that lot o' lambs t' see to before dinner. It's a grand marnin', this," he added, inconsequently.

"Uncle's bought a nice lot o' Leghorns, Tuesday," Rosa remarked. Anthony met her gaze; there was a grave, subdued expression on her face this morning, that made her look more of a woman, less of a girl.

Anthony Garstin's Courtship

"Ay, do ye show him the birds, Rosa. I'd be glad to have his opinion on 'em."

The old man turned to hobble into the house, and Rosa, as she supported his arm, called back over her shoulder :

"I'll not be a minute, Mr. Garstin."

Anthony strolled round to the yard behind the house, and waited, watching a flock of glossy-white poultry that strutted, perkily pecking, over the grass-grown cobbles.

"Ay, Miss Rosa, they're a bonny lot," he remarked, as the girl joined him.

"Are they not?" she rejoined, scattering a handful of corn before her.

The birds scuttled across the yard with greedy, outstretched necks. The two stood, side by side, gazing at them.

"What did he give for 'em?" Anthony asked.

"Fifty-five shillings."

"Ay," he assented, nodding absently.

"Was Dr. Sanderson na seein' o' yer father yesterday?" he asked, after a moment.

Anthony Garstin's Courtship

"He came in t' forenoon. He said he was jest na worse."

"Ye knew, Miss Rosa, as I'm still thinkin' on ye," he began abruptly, without looking up.

"I reckon it ain't much use," she answered shortly, scattering another handful of corn towards the birds. "I reckon I'll never marry. I'm jest weary o' bein' courted—"

"I would na weary ye wi' courtin'," he interrupted.

She laughed noisily.

"Ye are a queer customer, an' na mistake."

"I'm a match for Luke Stock anyway," he continued fiercely. "Ye think nought o' taking oop wi' him—about as ranty, wild a young feller as ever stepped."

The girl reddened, and bit her lip.

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Garstin. It seems to me ye're mighty hasty in jumpin' t' conclusions."

"Mabbe I kin see a thing or two," he retorted doggedly.

Anthony Garstin's Courtship

"Luke Stock's gone to London, anyway."

"Ay, an' a powerful good job too, in t' opinion o' some folks."

"Ye're jest jealous," she exclaimed, with a forced titter. "Ye're jest jealous o' Luke Stock."

"Nay, but ye need na fill yer head wi' that nonsense. I'm too deep set on ye t' feel jealousy," he answered, gravely.

The smile faded from her face, as she murmured :

"I canna mak ye out, Mr. Garstin."

"Nay, that ye canna. An' I suppose it's natural, considerin' ye're little more than a child, an' I'm a'most old enough to be yer father," he retorted, with blunt bitterness.

"But ye know yer mother's took that dislike t' me. She'd never abide the sight o' me at Hootsey."

He remained silent a moment, moodily reflecting.

"She'd jest ha' t' git ower it. I see nought in that objection," he declared.

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"Nay, Mr. Garstin, it canna be. Indeed it canna be at all. Ye'd best jest put it right from yer mind, once and for all."

"I'd jest best put it off my mind, had I? Ye talk like a child!" he burst out scornfully. "I intend ye t' coom t' love me, an' I will na tak ye till ye do. I'll jest go on waitin' for ye, an', mark my words, my day 'ull coom at last."

He spoke loudly, in a slow, stubborn voice, and stepped suddenly towards her. With a faint, frightened cry she shrank back into the doorway of the hen-house.

"Ye talk like a prophet. Ye sort o' skeer me."

He laughed grimly, and paused, reflectively scanning her face. He seemed about to continue in the same strain; but, instead, turned abruptly on his heel, and strode away through the garden gate.

IV

FOR three hundred years there had been a Garstin at Hootsey: generation after generation had tramped the grey stretch of upland, in the spring-time scattering their flocks over the fell-sides, and, at the "back-end," on dark, winter afternoons, driving them home again, down the broad bridle-path that led over the "raise." They had been a race of few words, "keeping themselves to themselves," as the phrase goes; beholden to no man, filled with a dogged, churlish pride—an upright, old-fashioned race, stubborn, long-lived, rude in speech, slow of resolve.

Anthony had never seen his father, who had died one night, upon the fell-top, he and his shepherd, engulfed in the great snowstorm of 1849. Folks had said that he was the only Garstin who had failed to make old man's bones.

Anthony Garstin's Courtship

After his death, Jake Atkinson, from Ribblehead in Yorkshire, had come to live at Hootsey. Jake was a fine farmer, a canny bargainer, and very handy among the sheep, till he took to drink, and roystering every week with the town wenches up at Carlisle. He was a corpulent, deep-voiced, free-handed fellow : when his time came, though he died very hardly, he remained festive and convivial to the last. And for years afterwards, in the valley, his memory lingered : men spoke of him regretfully, recalling his quips, his feats of strength, and his choice breed of Herdwicke rams. But he left behind him a host of debts up at Carlisle, in Penrith, and in almost every market town—debts that he had long ago pretended to have paid with money that belonged to his sister. The widow Garstin sold the twelve Herdwicke rams, and nine acres of land : within six weeks she had cleared off every penny, and for thirteen months, on Sundays, wore her mourning with a mute, forbidding grimness :

the bitter thought that, unbeknown to her, Jake had acted dishonestly in money matters, and that he had ended his days in riotous sin, soured her pride, imbued her with a rancorous hostility against all the world. For she was a very proud woman, independent, holding her head high, so folks said, like a Garstin bred and born; and Anthony, although some reckoned him quiet and of little account, came to take after her as he grew into manhood.

She took into her own hands the management of the Hootsey farm, and set the boy to work for her along with the two farm servants. It was twenty-five years now since his uncle Jake's death: there were grey hairs in his sandy beard; but he still worked for his mother, as he had done when a growing lad.

And now that times were grown to be bad (of late years the price of stock had been steadily falling; and the hay harvests had drifted from bad to worse) the widow Garstin

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no longer kept any labouring men ; but lived, she and her son, year in and year out, in a close parsimonious way.

That had been Anthony Garstin's life—a dull, eventless sort of business, the sluggish incrustation of monotonous years. And until Rosa Blencarn had come to keep house for her uncle, he had never thought twice on a woman's face.

The Garstins had always been good church-goers, and Anthony, for years, had acted as churchwarden. It was one summer evening, up at the vicarage, whilst he was checking the offertory account, that he first set eyes upon her. She was fresh back from school at Leeds : she was dressed in a white dress : she looked, he thought, like a London lady.

She stood by the window, tall and straight and queenly, dreamily gazing out into the summer twilight, whilst he and her uncle sat over their business. When he rose to go, she glanced at him with quick curiosity ; he

hurried away, muttering a sheepish good-night.

The next time that he saw her was in church on Sunday. He watched her shyly, with a hesitating, reverential discretion : her beauty seemed to him wonderful, distant, enigmatic. In the afternoon, young Mrs. Forsyth, from Longscale, dropped in for a cup of tea with his mother, and the two set off gossiping of Rosa Blencarn, speaking of her freely, in tones of acrimonious contempt. For a long while he sat silent, puffing at his pipe ; but at last, when his mother concluded with, "She looks t' me fair stuck-oop, full o' toonish airs an' graces," despite himself, he burst out : "Ye're jest wastin' yer breath wi' that cackle. I reckon Miss Blencarn's o' a different clay to us folks." Young Mrs. Forsyth tittered immoderately, and the next week it was rumoured about the valley that "Tony Garstin was gone luny over t' parson's niece."

But of all this he knew nothing—keeping

to himself, as was his wont, and being, besides, very busy with the hay harvest—until one day, at dinner-time, Henry Sisson asked if he'd started his courting ; Jacob Sowerby cried that Tony'd been too slow in getting to work, for that the girl had been seen spooning in Crosby Shaws with Curbison the auctioneer, and the others (there were half-a-dozen of them lounging round the hay-waggon) burst into a boisterous guffaw. Anthony flushed dully, looking hesitatingly from the one to the other ; then slowly put down his beer-can, and of a sudden, seizing Jacob by the neck, swung him heavily on the grass. He fell against the waggon-wheel, and when he rose the blood was streaming from an ugly cut in his forehead. And henceforward Tony Garstin's courtship was the common jest of all the parish.

As yet, however, he had scarcely spoken to her, though twice he had passed her in the lane that led up to the vicarage. She had

given him a frank, friendly smile ; but he had not found the resolution to do more than lift his hat. He and Henry Sisson stacked the hay in the yard behind the house ; there was no further mention made of Rosa Blencarn ; but all day long Anthony, as he knelt thatching the rick, brooded over the strange sweetness of her face, and on the fell-top, while he tramped after the ewes over the dry, crackling heather, and as he jogged along the narrow, rickety road, driving his cartload of lambs into the auction mart.

Thus, as the weeks slipped by, he was content with blunt, wistful ruminations upon her indistinct image. Jacob Sowerby's accusation, and several kindred innuendoes let fall by his mother, left him coolly incredulous ; the girl still seemed to him altogether distant ; but from the first sight of her face he had evolved a stolid, unfaltering conception of her difference from the ruck of her sex.

But one evening, as he passed the vicarage on his way down from the fells, she called to

him, and with a childish, confiding familiarity asked for advice concerning the feeding of the poultry. In his eagerness to answer her as best he could, he forgot his customary embarrassment, and grew, for the moment, almost voluble, and quite at his ease in her presence. Directly her flow of questions ceased, however, the returning perception of her rosy, hesitating smile, and of her large, deep eyes looking straight into his face, perturbed him strangely, and, reddening, he remembered the quarrel in the hay-field and the tale of Crosby Shaws.

After this, the poultry became a link between them—a link which he regarded in all seriousness, blindly unconscious that there was aught else to bring them together, only feeling himself in awe of her, because of her schooling, her townish manners, her ladylike mode of dress. And soon, he came to take a sturdy, secret pride in her friendly familiarity towards him. Several times a week he would meet her in the lane, and

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they would loiter a moment together ; she would admire his dogs, though he assured her earnestly that they were but sorry curs ; and once, laughing at his staidness, she nicknamed him “ Mr. Churchwarden.”

That the girl was not liked in the valley he suspected, curtly attributing her unpopularity to the women’s senseless jealousy. Of gossip concerning her he heard no further hint ; but instinctively, and partly from that rugged, natural reserve of his, shrank from mentioning her name, even incidentally, to his mother.

Now, on Sunday evenings, he often strolled up to the vicarage, each time quitting his mother with the same awkward affectation of casualness ; and, on his return, becoming vaguely conscious of how she refrained from any comment on his absence, and appeared oddly oblivious of the existence of parson Blencarn’s niece.

She had always been a sour-tongued woman ; but, as the days shortened with the

approach of the long winter months, she seemed to him to grow more fretful than ever ; at times it was almost as if she bore him some smouldering, sullen resentment. He was of stubborn fibre, however, toughened by long habit of a bleak, unruly climate ; he revolved the matter in his mind deliberately, and when, at last, after much plodding thought, it dawned upon him that she resented his acquaintance with Rosa Blencarn, he accepted the solution with an unflinching phlegm, and merely shifted his attitude towards the girl, calculating each day the likelihood of his meeting her, and making, in her presence, persistent efforts to break down, once for all, the barrier of his own timidity. He was a man not to be clumsily driven, still less, so he prided himself, a man to be craftily led.

It was close upon Christmas time before the crisis came. His mother was just home from Penrith market. The spring-cart stood in the yard, the old grey horse was steaming heavily in the still, frosty air.

"I reckon ye've come fast. T' ould horse is over hot," he remarked bluntly, as he went to the animal's head.

She clambered down hastily, and, coming to his side, began breathlessly :

"Ye ought t' hev coom t' market, Tony. There's bin pretty goin's on in Pe'rith to-day. I was helpin' Anna Forsyth t' choose six yards o' sheetin' in Dockroy, when we sees Rosa Blencarn coom oot o' t' 'Bell and Bullock' in company wi' Curbison and young Joe Smethwick. Smethwick was fair reelin' drunk, and Curbison and t' girl were a-houldin' on to him, to keep him fra fallin'; and then, after a bit, he puts his arm round the girl t' stiddy hisself, and that fashion they goes off, right oop t' public street——"

He continued to unload the packages, and to carry them mechanically one by one into the house. Each time, when he re-appeared, she was standing by the steaming horse, busy with her tale.

"An' on t' road hame we passed t' three

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on' em in Curbison's trap, with Smethwick
leein' in t' bottom, singin' maudlin' songs.
They were passin' Dunscale village, an' t'
folks coom runnin' oot o' houses t' see 'em
go past——”

He led the cart away towards the stable,
leaving her to cry the remainder after him
across the yard.

Half-an-hour later he came in for his
dinner. During the meal not a word passed
between them, and directly he had finished
he strode out of the house. About nine
o'clock he returned, lit his pipe, and sat
down to smoke it over the kitchen fire.

“Where've ye bin, Tony?” she asked.

“Oop t' vicarage, courtin',” he retorted
defiantly, with his pipe in his mouth.

This was ten months ago ; ever since he
had been doggedly waiting. That evening
he had set his mind on the girl, he intended
to have her ; and while his mother gibed, as
she did now upon every opportunity, his
patience remained grimly unflagging. She

would remind him that the farm belonged to her, that he would have to wait till her death before he could bring the hussy to Houtsey : he would retort that as soon as the girl would have him, he intended taking a small holding over at Scarsdale. Then she would give way, and for a while piteously upbraid him with her old age, and with the memory of all the years she and he had spent together, and he would comfort her with a display of brusque, evasive remorse.

But, none the less, on the morrow, his thoughts would return to dwell on the haunting vision of the girl's face, while his own rude, credulous chivalry, kindled by the recollection of her beauty, stifled his misgivings concerning her conduct.

Meanwhile she dallied with him, and amused herself with the younger men. Her old uncle fell ill in the spring, and could scarcely leave the house. She declared that she found life in the valley intolerably dull, that she hated the quiet of the place, that

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she longed for Leeds, and the exciting bustle of the streets ; and in the evenings she wrote long letters to the girl-friends she had left behind there, describing with petulant vivacity her tribe of rustic admirers. At the harvest-time she went back on a fortnight's visit to friends ; the evening before her departure she promised Anthony to give him her answer on her return. But, instead, she avoided him, pretended to have promised in jest, and took up with Luke Stock, a cattle-dealer from Wigton.

V

IT was three weeks since he had fetched his flock down from the fell.

After dinner he and his mother sat together in the parlour : they had done so every Sunday afternoon, year in and year out, as far back as he could remember.

A row of mahogany chairs, with shiny, horse-hair seats, were ranged round the room.

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A great collection of agricultural prize-tickets were pinned over the wall ; and, on a heavy, highly-polished sideboard stood several silver cups. A heap of gilt-edged shavings filled the unused grate : there were gaudily-tinted roses along the mantelpiece, and, on a small table by the window, beneath a glass-case, a gilt basket filled with imitation flowers. Every object was disposed with a scrupulous precision : the carpet and the red-patterned cloth on the centre table were much faded. The room was spotlessly clean, and wore, in the chilly winter sunlight, a rigid, comfortless air.

Neither spoke, or appeared conscious of the other's presence. Old Mrs. Garstin, wrapped in a woollen shawl, sat knitting : Anthony dozed fitfully on a stiff-backed chair.

Of a sudden, in the distance, a bell started tolling. Anthony rubbed his eyes drowsily, and taking from the table his Sunday hat, strolled out across the dusky fields. Pre-

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sently, reaching a rude wooden seat, built beside the bridle-path, he sat down and relit his pipe. The air was very still ; below him a white filmy mist hung across the valley : the fell sides, vaguely grouped, resembled hulking masses of sombre shadow ; and, as he looked back, three squares of glimmering gold revealed the lighted windows of the square-towered church.

He sat smoking ; pondering, with placid and reverential contemplation, on the Mighty Maker of the world—a world majestically and inevitably ordered ; a world where, he argued, each object—each fissure in the fells, the winding course of each tumbling stream—possesses its mysterious purport, its inevitable signification. . . .

At the end of the field two rams were fighting ; retreating, then running together, and, leaping from the ground, butting head to head and horn to horn. Anthony watched them absently, pursuing his rude meditations.

. . . And the succession of bad seasons,

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the slow ruination of the farmers throughout the country, were but punishment meted out for the accumulated wickedness of the world. In the olden time God rained plagues upon the land : now-a-days, in His wrath, He spoiled the produce of the earth, which, with His own hands, He had fashioned and bestowed upon men.

He rose and continued his walk along the bridle-path. A multitude of rabbits scuttled up the hill at his approach ; and a great cloud of plovers, rising from the rushes, circled overhead, filling the air with a profusion of their querulous cries. All at once he heard a rattling of stones, and perceived a number of small pieces of shingle bounding in front of him down the grassy slope.

A woman's figure was moving among the rocks above him. The next moment, by the trimming of crimson velvet on her hat, he had recognized her. He mounted the slope with springing strides, wondering the while how it was she came to be there, that she

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was not in church playing the organ at afternoon service.

Before she was aware of his approach, he was beside her.

"I thought ye'd be in church——" he began.

She started : then, gradually regaining her composure, answered, weakly smiling :

"Mr. Jenkinson, the new school-master, wanted to try the organ."

He came towards her impulsively : she saw the odd flickers in his eyes as she stepped back in dismay.

"Nay, but I will na harm ye," he said. "Only I reckon what 'tis a special turn o' Providence, meetin' wi' ye oop here. I reckon what ye'll hev t' give me a square answer noo. Ye canna dilly-dally everlastingly."

He spoke almost brutally ; and she stood, white and gasping, staring at him with large, frightened eyes. The sheep-walk was but a tiny threadlike track : the slope of the shingle

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on either side was very steep : below them lay the valley ; distant, lifeless, all blurred by the evening dusk. She looked about her helplessly for a means of escape.

“ Miss Rosa,” he continued, in a husky voice, “ can ye na coom t’ think on me? Think ye, I’ve bin waitin’ nigh upon two year for ye. I’ve watched ye tak oop, first wi’ this young fellar, and then wi’ that, till soomtimes my heart’s fit t’ burst. Many a day, oop on t’ fell-top, t’ thought o’ ye’s nigh driven me daft, and I’ve left my shepherdin’ jest t’ set on a cairn in t’ mist, picturin’ an’ broodin’ on yer face. Many an evenin’ I’ve started oop t’ vicarage, wi’ t’ resolution t’ speak right oot t’ ye ; but when it coomed t’ point, a sort o’ timidity seemed t’ hould me back, I was that feared t’ displease ye. I knew I’m na scholar, an’ mabbe ye think I’m rough-mannered. I knew I’ve spoken sharply to ye once or twice lately. But it’s jest because I’m that mad wi’ love for ye : I jest canna help myself soomtimes——”

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He waited, peering into her face. She could see the beads of sweat above his bristling eyebrows: the damp had settled on his sandy beard: his horny fingers were twitching at the buttons of his black Sunday coat.

She struggled to summon a smile; but her underlip quivered, and her large dark eyes filled slowly with tears.

And he went on :

“Ye've coom t' mean jest everything to me. Ef ye will na hev me, I care for nought else. I canna speak t' ye in phrases: I'm jest a plain, unscholarly man: I canna wheedle ye, wi' cunnin' after t' fashion o' toon folks. But I can love ye wi' all my might, an' watch over ye, and work for ye better than any one o' em——”

She was crying to herself, silently, while he spoke. He noticed nothing, however: the twilight hid her face from him.

“There's nought against me,” he persisted.
“I'm as good a man as any one on 'em. Ay,

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as good a man as any one on 'em," he repeated defiantly, raising his voice.

"It's impossible, Mr. Garstin, it's impossible. Ye've been very kind to me——" she added, in a choking voice.

"Wa dang it, I didna mean t' mak ye cry, lass," he exclaimed, with a softening of his tone. "There's nought for ye t' cry ower."

She sank on to the stones, passionately sobbing in hysterical and defenceless despair. Anthony stood a moment, gazing at her in clumsy perplexity: then, coming close to her, put his hand on her shoulder, and said gently:

"Coom, lass, what's trouble? Ye can trust me."

She shook her head faintly.

"Ay, but ye can though," he asserted, firmly. "Come, what is 't?"

Heedless of him, she continued to rock herself to and fro, crooning in her distress:

"Oh! I wish I were dead! . . . I wish I could die!"

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—“Wish ye could die?” he repeated.
“Why, whatever can’t be that’s troublin’ ye like this? There, there, lassie, give ower: it ’ull all coom right, whatever it be——”

“No, no,” she wailed. “I wish I could die! . . . I wish I could die!”

Lights were twinkling in the village below; and across the valley darkness was draping the hills. The girl lifted her face from her hands, and looked up at him with a scared, bewildered expression.

“I must go home: I must be getting home,” she muttered.

“Nay, but there’s sommut mighty amiss wi’ ye.”

“No, it’s nothing . . . I don’t know—I’m not well . . . I mean it’s nothing . . . it’ll pass over . . . you mustn’t think anything of it.”

“Nay, but I canna stand by an see ye in sich trouble.”

“It’s nothing, Mr. Garstin, indeed it’s nothing,” she repeated.

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"Ay, but I canna credit that," he objected stubbornly.

She sent him a shifting, hunted glance.

"Let me get home . . . you must let me get home."

She made a tremulous, pitiful attempt at firmness. Eyeing her keenly, he barred her path : she flushed scarlet, and looked hastily away across the valley.

"If ye'll tell me yer distress, mabbe I can help ye."

"No, no, it's nothing . . . it's nothing."

"If ye'll tell me yer distress, mabbe I can help ye," he repeated, with a solemn, deliberate sternness. She shivered, and looked away again, vaguely, across the valley.

"You can do nothing : there's nought to be done," she murmured drearily.

"There's a man in this business," he declared.

"Let me go ! Let me go !" she pleaded desperately.

"Who is't that's bin puttin' ye into this

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distress?" His voice sounded loud and harsh.

"No one, no one. I canna tell ye, Mr. Garstin. . . . It's no one," she protested weakly. The white, twisted look on his face frightened her.

"My God!" he burst out, gripping her wrist, "an' a proper soft fool ye've made o' me. Who is't, I tell ye? Who's t' man?"

"Ye're hurtin' me. Let me go. I canna tell ye."

"And ye're fond o' him?"

"No, no. He's a wicked, sinful man. I pray God I may never set eyes on him again. I told him so."

"But ef he's got ye into trouble, he'll hev t' marry ye," he persisted with a brutal bitterness.

"I will not. I hate him!" she cried fiercely.

"But is he *willin'* t' marry ye?"

"I don't know . . . I don't care . . . he

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said so before he went away . . . But I'd kill myself sooner than live with him."

He let her hands fall and stepped back from her. She could only see his figure, like a sombre cloud, standing before her. The whole fell-side seemed still and dark and lonely. Presently she heard his voice again :

"I reckon what there's one road oot o' yer distress."

She shook her head drearily.

"There's none. I'm a lost woman."

"An' ef ye took me instead?" he said eagerly.

"I—I don't understand—"

"Ef ye married me instead of Luke Stock ?"

"But that's impossible—the—the—"

"Ay, t' child. I know. But I'll tak t' child as mine."

She remained silent. After a moment he heard her voice answer in a queer, distant tone :

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"You mean that—that ye're ready to marry me, and adopt the child?"

"I do," he answered doggedly.

"But people—your mother——?"

"Folks 'ull jest know nought about it. It's none o' their business. T' child 'ull pass as mine. Ye'll accept that?"

"Yes," she answered, in a low, rapid voice.

"Ye'll consent t' hev me, ef I git ye oot o' yer trouble?"

"Yes," she repeated, in the same tone.

She heard him draw a long breath.

"I said 't was a turn o' Providence, meetin' wi' ye oop here," he exclaimed, with half-suppressed exultation.

Her teeth began to chatter a little: she felt that he was peering at her, curiously, through the darkness.

"An' noo," he continued briskly, "ye'd best be gettin' home. Give me ye're hand, an' I'll stiddy ye ower t' stones."

He helped her down the bank of shingle,

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exclaiming : "By goom, ye're stony cauld." Once or twice she slipped : he supported her, roughly gripping her knuckles. The stones rolled down the steps, noisily, disappearing into the night.

Presently they struck the turf bridle-path, and, as they descended silently towards the lights of the village, he said gravely :

"I always reckoned what my day 'ud coom."

She made no reply ; and he added grimly :

"There'll be terrible work wi' mother over this."

He accompanied her down the narrow lane that led past her uncle's house. When the lighted windows came in sight he halted.

"Good-night, lassie," he said kindly. "Do ye give ower distressin' yeself."

"Good-night, Mr. Garstin," she answered, in the same low, rapid voice in which she had given him her answer up on the fell.

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"We're man an' wife plighted now, are we not?" he blurted timidly.

She held her face to his, and he kissed her on the cheek, clumsily.

VI

THE next morning the frost had set in. The sky was still clear and glittering : the whitened fields sparkled in the chilly sunlight : here and there, on high, distant peaks, gleamed dainty caps of snow. All the week Anthony was to be busy at the fell-foot, wall-building against the coming of the winter storms : the work was heavy, for he was single-handed, and the stone had to be fetched from off the fell-side. Two or three times a day he led his rickety, lumbering cart along the lane that passed the vicarage gate, pausing on each journey to glance furtively up at the windows. But he saw no sign of Rosa Blencarn ; and, indeed, he felt no longing to see her : he was grimly

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exultant over the remembrance of his wooing of her, and over the knowledge that she was his. There glowed within him a stolid pride in himself : he thought of the others who had courted her, and the means by which he had won her seemed to him a fine stroke of cleverness.

And so he refrained from any mention of the matter ; relishing, as he worked, all alone, the days through, the consciousness of his secret triumph, and anticipating, with inward chucklings, the discomfited cackle of his mother's female friends. He foresaw, without misgiving, her bitter opposition : he felt himself strong ; and his heart warmed towards the girl. And when, at intervals, the brusque realization that, after all, he was to possess her swept over him, he gripped the stones, and swung them almost fiercely into their places.

All around him the white, empty fields seemed slumbering breathlessly. The stillness stiffened the leafless trees. The frosty

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air flicked his blood : singing vigorously to himself he worked with a stubborn, unflagging resolution, methodically postponing, till the length of the wall should be completed, the announcement of his betrothal.

After his reticent, solitary fashion, he was very happy, reviewing his future prospects, with a plain and steady assurance, and, as the week-end approached, coming to ignore the irregularity of the whole business : almost to assume, in the exaltation of his pride, that he had won her honestly ; and to discard, stolidly, all thought of Luke Stock, of his relations with her, of the coming child that was to pass for his own.

And there were moments too, when, as he sauntered homewards through the dusk at the end of his day's work, his heart grew full to overflowing of a rugged, superstitious gratitude towards God in Heaven who had granted his desires.

About three o'clock on the Saturday afternoon he finished the length of wall. He

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went home, washed, shaved, put on his Sunday coat ; and, avoiding the kitchen, where his mother sat knitting by the fireside, strode up to the vicarage.

It was Rosa who opened the door to him. On recognizing him she started, and he followed her into the dining-room. He seated himself, and began, brusquely :

“ I’ve coom, Miss Rosa, t’ speak t’ Mr. Blencarn.”

Then added, eyeing her closely :

“ Ye’re lookin’ sick, lass.”

Her faint smile accentuated the worn, white look on her face.

“ I reckon ye’ve been frettin’ yeself,” he continued gently, “ leein’ awake o’ nights, hev’n’t yee, noo ? ”

She smiled vaguely.

“ Well, but ye see I’ve coom t’ settle t’ whole business for ye. Ye thought mabbe that I was na a man o’ my word.”

“ No, no, not that,” she protested, “ but—
but——”

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"But what then?"

"Ye must not do it, Mr. Garstin . . . I must just bear my own trouble the best I can—" she broke out.

"D'ye fancy I'm takin' ye oot of charity? Ye little reckon the sort o' stuff my love for ye's made of. Nay, Miss Rosa, but ye canna draw back noo."

"But ye cannot do it, Mr. Garstin. Ye know your mother will na have me at Hootsey. . . . I could na live there with your mother. . . . I'd sooner bear my trouble alone, as best I can. . . . She's that stern is Mrs. Garstin. I couldn't look her in the face. . . . I can go away somewhere. . . . I could keep it all from uncle."

Her colour came and went: she stood before him, looking away from him, dully, out of the window.

"I intend ye t' coom t' Hootsey. I'm na lad: I reckon I can choose my own wife. Mother'll hev ye at t' farm, right enough: ye need na distress yeself on that point—"

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"Nay, Mr. Garstin, but indeed she will not, never. . . . I know she will not. . . . She always set herself against me, right from the first."

"Ay, but that was different. T' case is all changed noo," he objected doggedly.

"She'll support the sight of me all the less," the girl faltered.

"Mother'll hev ye at Hootsey—receive ye willin' of her own free wish—of her own free wish, d'ye hear? I'll answer for that."

He struck the table with his fist heavily. His tone of determination awed her: she glanced at him hurriedly, struggling with her irresolution.

"I knew hoo t' manage mother. An' now," he concluded, changing his tone, "is yer uncle about t' place?"

"He's up the paddock, I think," she answered.

"Well, I'll jest step oop and hev a word wi' him."

"Ye're . . . ye will na tell him."

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"Tut, tut, na harrowin' tales, ye need na fear, lass. I reckon ef I can tackle mother, I can accommodate myself t' parson Blencarn."

He rose, and coming close to her, scanned her face.

"Ye must git t' roses back t' yer cheeks," he exclaimed, with a short laugh, "I canna be takin' a ghost t' church."

She smiled tremulously, and he continued, laying one hand affectionately on her shoulder:

"Nay, but I was but jestin'. Roses or na roses, ye'll be t' bonniest bride in all Coomberland. I'll meet ye in Hullam lane, after church time, to-morrow," he added, moving towards the door.

After he had gone, she hurried to the backdoor furtively. His retreating figure was already mounting the grey upland field. Presently, beyond him, she perceived her uncle, emerging through the paddock gate. She ran across the poultry yard, and mount-

ing a tub, stood watching the two figures as they moved towards one another along the brow, Anthony vigorously trudging, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets ; her uncle, his wideawake tilted over his nose, hobbling, and leaning stiffly on his pair of sticks. They met ; she saw Anthony take her uncle's arm : the two, turning together, strolled away towards the fell.

She went back into the house. Anthony's dog came towards her, slinking along the passage. She caught the animal's head in her hands, and bent over it caressingly, in an impulsive outburst of almost hysterical affection.

VII

THE two men returned towards the vicarage. At the paddock gate they halted, and the old man concluded :

"I could not have wished a better man for her, Anthony. Mabbe the Lord 'll not be minded to spare me much longer. After

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I'm gone Rosa 'll hev all I possess. She was my poor brother Isaac's only child. After her mother was taken, he, poor fellow, went altogether to the bad, and until she came here she mostly lived among strangers. It's been a wretched sort of childhood for her—a wretched sort of childhood. Ye'll take care of her, Anthony, will ye not? . . . Nay, but I could not hev wished for a better man for her, and there's my hand on 't."

"Thank ee, Mr. Blencarn, thank ee," Anthony answered huskily, gripping the old man's hand.

And he started off down the lane home-wards.

His heart was full of a strange, rugged exaltation. He felt with a swelling pride that God had entrusted to him this great charge—to tend her; to make up to her, tenfold, for all that loving care, which, in her childhood, she had never known. And together with a stubborn confidence in him-

self, there welled up within him a great pity for her—a tender pity, that, chastening with his passion, made her seem to him, as he brooded over that lonely childhood of hers, the more distinctly beautiful, the more profoundly precious. He pictured to himself, tremulously, almost incredulously, their married life—in the winter, his return home at nightfall to find her awaiting him with a glad, trustful smile; their evenings, passed together, sitting in silent happiness over the smouldering logs; or, in summer-time, the mid-day rest in the hay-fields when, wearing perhaps a large-brimmed hat fastened with a red ribbon, beneath her chin, he would catch sight of her, carrying his dinner, coming across the upland.

She had not been brought up to be a farmer's wife: she was but a child still, as the old parson had said. She should not have to work as other men's wives worked: she should dress like a lady, and on Sundays, in church, wear fine bonnets,

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and remain, as she had always been, the belle of all the parish.

And, meanwhile, he would farm as he had never farmed before, watching his opportunities, driving cunning bargains, spending nothing on himself, hoarding every penny that she might have what she wanted. . . . And, as he strode through the village, he seemed to foresee a general brightening of prospects, a sobering of the fever of speculation in sheep, a cessation of the insensate glutting, year after year, of the great winter marts throughout the North, a slackening of the foreign competition followed by a steady revival of the price of fatted stocks—a period of prosperity in store for the farmer at last. . . . And the future years appeared to open out before him, spread like a distant, glittering plain, across which, he and she, hand in hand, were called to travel together. . . .

And then, suddenly, as his iron-bound boots clattered over the cobbled yard, he remembered, with brutal determination, his

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mother, and the stormy struggle that awaited him.

He waited till supper was over, till his mother had moved from the table to her place by the chimney corner. For several minutes he remained debating with himself the best method of breaking the news to her. Of a sudden he glanced up at her : her knitting had slipped on to her lap : she was sitting, bunched of a heap in her chair, nodding with sleep. By the flickering light of the wood fire, she looked worn and broken : he felt a twinge of clumsy compunction. And then he remembered the piteous, hunted look in the girl's eyes, and the old man's words when they had parted at the paddock gate, and he blurted out :

"I doot but what I'll hev t' marry Rosa Blencarn after all."

She started, and blinking her eyes, said :
"I was jest takin' a wink o' sleep. What was 't ye were saying, Tony ?"

He hesitated a moment, puckering his

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forehead into coarse rugged lines, and fidgeting noisily with his tea-cup. Presently he repeated :

“I doot but what I'll hev t' marry Rosa Blencarn after all.”

She rose stiffly, and stepping down from the hearth, came towards him.

“Mabbe I did na hear ye aright, Tony.” She spoke hurriedly, and though she was quite close to him, steadying herself with one hand clutching the back of his chair, her voice sounded weak, distant almost.

“Look oop at me. Look oop into my face,” she commanded fiercely.

He obeyed sullenly.

“Noo oot wi 't. What's yer meanin', Tony?”

“I mean what I say,” he retorted doggedly, averting his gaze.

“What d'ye mean by sayin' that ye've got t' marry her?”

“I tell yer I mean what I say,” he repeated dully.

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"Ye mean ye've bin an' put t' girl in trouble?"

He said nothing ; but sat staring stupidly at the floor.

"Look oop at me, and answer," she commanded, gripping his shoulder and shaking him.

He raised his face slowly, and met her glance.

"Ay, that's about it," he answered.

"This 'll na be truth. It 'll be jest a piece o' wanton trickery!" she cried.

"Nay, but 't is truth," he answered deliberately.

"Ye will na swear t' it?" she persisted.

"I see na necessity for swearin'."

"Then ye canna swear t' it," she burst out triumphantly.

He paused an instant ; then said quietly :

"Ay, but I'll swear t' it easy enough.
Fetch t' Book."

She lifted the heavy, tattered Bible from the chimney-piece, and placed it before

him on the table. He laid his lumpish fist on it.

"Say," she continued with a tense tremulousness, "say, I swear t' ye, mother, that 't is t' truth, t' whole truth, and noat but t' truth, s'help me God."

"I swear t' ye, mother, it's truth, t' whole truth, and nothin' but t' truth, s'help me God," he repeated after her.

"Kiss t' Book," she ordered.

He lifted the Bible to his lips. As he replaced it on the table, he burst out into a short laugh :

"Be ye satisfied noo?"

She went back to the chimney corner without a word. The logs on the hearth hissed and crackled. Outside, amid the blackness the wind was rising, hooting through the firs, and past the windows.

After a long while he roused himself, and drawing his pipe from his pocket almost steadily, proceeded leisurely to pare in the palm of his hand a lump of black tobacco.

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"We'll be asked in church Sunday," he remarked bluntly.

She made no answer.

He looked across at her.

Her mouth was drawn tight at the corners : her face wore a queer, rigid aspect. She looked, he thought, like a figure of stone.

"Ye're not feeling poorly, are ye, mother?" he asked.

She shook her head grimly : then, hobbling out into the room, began to speak in a shrill, tuneless voice.

"Ye talked at one time o' takin' a farm over Scarsdale way. But ye'd best stop here. I'll no hinder ye. Ye can have t' large bedroom in t' front, and I'll move ower to what used to be my brother Jake's room. Ye know I've never had no opinion of t' girl, but I'll do what's right by her, ef I break my sperrit in t' doin' on't. I'll mak' t' girl welcome here : I'll stand by her proper-like : mebbe I'll finish by findin' soom good in her. But from this day forward, Tony,

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ye're na son o' mine. Ye've dishonoured yeself: ye've laid a trap for me—ay, laid a trap, that's t' word. Ye've brought shame and bitterness on yer ould mother in her ould age. Ye've made me despise t' varra seet o' ye. Ye can stop on here, but ye shall niver touch a penny of my money; every shillin' of 't shall go t' yer child, or to your child's children. Ay," she went on, raising her voice, "ay, ye've got yer way at last, and mebbe ye reckon ye've chosen a mighty smart way. But time 'ull coom when ye'll regret this day, when ye eat oot yer repentance in doost an' ashes. Ay, Lord 'ull punish ye, Tony, chastise ye properly. Ye'll learn that marriage begun in sin can end in nought but sin. Ay," she concluded, as she reached the door, raising her skinny hand prophetically, "ay, after I'm deed and gone, ye mind ye o' t' words o' t' apostle—'For them that hev sinned without t' law, shall also perish without t' law.' "

And she slammed the door behind her.



TREVOR PERKINS
A PLATONIC EPISODE



TREVOR PERKINS

A PLATONIC EPISODE

I

TREVOR PERKINS, when he had hung up his hat, sat down, adjusted his spectacles, and ran his fingers through his lanky hair. The long, low room presented an ill-scoured and impoverished aspect. It was almost deserted : a woman in a gaudy bonnet, poring over a half-penny newspaper, sat absently munching thick slices of bread-and-butter ; at the far end two elderly gentlemen in shabby tall hats clicked their dominoes over the marble-topped table. The atmosphere was heavy with the scent of stale food, and the waitresses—three anæmic young women, wearing white caps and black,

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close-fitting dresses—stood stationed in weary, listless attitudes. From outside, through the half-opened door, drifted the rumble of the Strand and the shuffle of hurrying feet ; and behind the blurred glass of the shop-window flitted the ceaseless passage of dim silhouettes.

“Good-afternoon, Mr. Perkins. You’re quite a stranger,” the waitress began, standing before him and leaning in a vaguely coquettish attitude, her knuckles on the greasy, marble-topped table.

“Yes, I’ve been troubled all the spring with a disagreeable cough,” the young man answered.

His voice was precise and without tone. His head was wide and overgrown ; he sat in a limp, ungraceful attitude ; his shoulders were narrow and sloping ; his whole frame meagre, almost puny. He fingered his scraggy, immature moustache, and his face, behind the gold-rimmed spectacles, wore the pale placidity of a thoughtful mind.

“Most likely it’ll be on account of this

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funny, changeable weather we've been having. It's more seasonable to-day though, isn't it? You're not looking very flash," she added. "Tea and tea-cake, I suppose?"

"Yes, if you please, and I think I could fancy an egg."

"I'll pick you out a nice one," said the girl as she turned away.

For a moment he let his eyes follow her retreating figure, then once more ran his fingers slowly through his lanky hair.

Presently, drawing a book from his pocket, he opened it before him and began to read.

"When a man does some violence to his own nature in adhering to the parent bulk; when its character and aspirations are not repeated in him; when his duty to himself runs counter to his outward obligations; when the component parts of the State, its institutions, must have mainstays passed round them to hold them together; when the family is no longer the State in miniature, and woman demurs to what is expected of

her ; when the populace breaks over its natural barriers ; when the faculty of building ceases ; when the Ideal and the Practical seem mutually antagonistic, and the youth must crush his genius into cleverness if he will catch on as a citizen—then of that State it may be said that its day, as a State, is over ; that nature is no longer in it ; and that endless disintegration is its portion——”

The girl, clattering her tray on to the table, interrupted him ; he looked up at her with an impatient gesture ; then, while she arranged the tea-things before him, turned again to his book. When he ceased reading, she had moved away.

The words, “When a man does some violence to his own nature in adhering to the parent bulk . . . when his duty to himself runs counter to his outward obligations,” sang in his ears as he stirred his tea. And, pondering on the significance of his past life, he seemed to realize the profundity of the phrase.

Yes, the curse of decadence lay over the land. The ancient idols had been cast down in the market-place. A new generation had arisen ; a generation old before its time—“Venue trop tard dans un siècle trop vieux,” as the French poet had sung ; a generation doomed to the irreparable loss of the happy illusions of youth ; a generation incapable of faith, groaning beneath an accumulation of precocious experience, eternally haunted by the hideous habit of introspection.

Yes, and in his own case how true it all was ! As he finished his egg all his boyhood came back to him : the lengthy, dreary Sunday morning hours spent beside his father and mother in that bare Baptist chapel off the Pentonville Road ; the attitude of bawling familiarity, half cringing, half patronizing, adopted by the minister towards the Deity ; his own first boyish, timorous doublings, resolving themselves later into long, secret searchings of heart ; then the stern resolve to learn, to judge things for himself ; the

nights spent in sifting the truth, absorbed in Voltaire, Rousseau, and Herbert Spencer; and finally, that eventful morning of his great revolt—his dramatic refusal to accompany his father to chapel, his defiant proclamation of his intellectual emancipation. . . . He recalled all the details of the crisis with a mild and complacent pride.

And yet—and yet, he mused bitterly, of what avail had these things proved? To the sensitive the fruit of the tree of knowledge tasted bitter as Dead Sea fruit—that was the inexorable law. He finished his tea thoughtfully, and reminded himself how he had elected to live his own life—apart, shrinking instinctively from the heedless and facile animality of his fellow-salesmen, acquiescing in their disdain of him, effacing himself during shop-hours, and allowing those of coarser fibre to oust him from promotion, to push their way past him, up into the superior departments. Upon none of these things, he told himself, had he set his heart: he had

preferred to stand aside calmly while the others jostled past him in their senseless race for worldly success, jealously preserving his pride in himself, and in the evenings, in the cheerless solitude of his bedroom, awakening to a pent-up consciousness of the play of his own personality.

Thus he had passed through many phases. Thus, in his way, he had become a dilettante, cultivating with no slight care that "state of mind at once very intelligent and very voluptuous which inclines us towards diverse forms of life, and leads us to lend ourselves to each one of these in turn, without giving ourselves up to any one of them."

He had studied Shakspere diligently, and to elevate his conception of life, had committed to memory the more philosophical passages. He had read *Wilhelm Meister* from beginning to end; he worshipped Goethe vaguely as the highest human type. Ruskin had been to him a revelation from which he had never altogether recovered, though latterly

the theory of "Art for Art's sake" had, upon consideration, seemed to him curiously alluring. He judged Carlyle to be a man of genius, and Byron to be a great poet, and he was wont to pride himself upon the modernity of his contempt for the vulgar works of Charles Dickens. He possessed two volumes of the suppressed English translation of M. Zola's works : he believed Paris to be an immoral city. He considered himself to be a passionate lover of books, like Charles Lamb or the late Lord Macaulay ; he read with avidity the strenuous productions of certain contemporary novelists and the literary page of the *Daily Chronicle*. He kept a psychological diary—an elaborate record of his thoughts and sensations,—and once upon a time he had written an essay upon "Life's Ultimate Aim," which had been accepted, but never published, by a weekly journal of advanced thought.

He was alone in the world. He had discovered that for his parents he had no

genuine affection, and this discovery he was wont to deplore, upbraiding himself weakly that he could not overlook the crude bigotry of their point of view. He had no real friends : he had found no one to whom he could unbosom his intimate thoughts. So, though outwardly he appeared to mix with the world, to assume an indifferent acquiescence in its ways, inwardly he lived the life of a recluse, communing in solitude with himself alone. Instinctively he shrank from the coarse contact of men—from their blatant glorification of their animal instincts,—and there were moments when his soul yearned vaguely for the subtle companionship of a woman's delicate mind.

Not that, in his time, he had not experienced the whole gamut of love. Five years ago, on the very threshold of life, he had given his heart to a woman, and during three weeks he had lived, as it seemed to him now, through all the wonderful and tormenting ecstasy of love. He had made himself

her slave : he had worshipped the ground on which she trod ; and then, one day she had ignobly betrayed him. He had traversed all the heights and depths of human passion, and he had suffered as only the sensitive know how to suffer. For five years had this dearly bought knowledge of the perfidy of woman and the haunting consciousness of his own disillusionment restrained him from further amorous experience. All the confident spontaneity of his youth was turned to bitterness and gall : he had grown cynical and pessimistic, he looked upon his faith in human nature as irrevocably shattered.

But latterly, an indefinable disquietude, a strange and morbid dissatisfaction, seemed to have taken possession of his being, and finally, one evening, after reading an English translation of one of M. Bourget's novels, he had felt this wistful conviction steal over him —that where his fellow-men failed to comprehend his secluded attitude, a woman might succeed ; and that a woman might appreciate

him for that very sensitivity of his which was so apt to excite the coarser sex to active hostility; and that perhaps, after all, Life was more important than Literature, and that an assiduous cultivation of self, by means of a cunning management of experience, represented the last word of a *fin-de-siècle* philosophy.

The two elderly gentlemen adjusted their shabby tall hats and prepared to relinquish their dominoes. The woman in the gaudy bonnet was gone. Trevor Perkins roused himself from his reverie, and, glancing round the room, caught the eye of the waitress. She smiled responsively and came towards him.

Her name was Emily Hammond, and she lived with her married sister, whose husband kept a tobacconist's shop off the Euston Road. She had confided to him that she was not happy at home, and from time to time (he had frequented the shop for more than a year) he had talked to her of his

loneliness, hinted at the great grief of his early boyhood, and explained something of the bitterness of his disillusionment. She had not altogether comprehended his meaning, but she would listen to him with a sympathetic attention that seemed to him, when he reflected on it, almost pathetic ; and he found that their talks together stimulated him to a keener realization of himself.

So, one Easter Monday afternoon, he had taken her to Olympia, and afterwards, at tea on the Rialto (the entertainment consisted of a representation of Venice in London), he had talked to her of the Renaissance—of that wonderful revival of learning in Italy after the darkness of the Middle Ages—and when he had finished she had told him shyly how his cleverness intimidated her. Then, in a moment of weakness he had fondly dreamed that her simple, unaffected companionship might have proved a solace to him, and that together they might have achieved that most perfect of human relationships—real friend-

ship between man and woman. But before long he had discovered that she was in the habit of frequenting the minor music-halls with a cousin of hers, a gaudy youth from the City; and remembering his own sensitivity, he had cynically set to work to shatter this, perhaps the last of his illusions. With that quick pride that was characteristic of him he had let his intimacy with her brusquely lapse. Yet even so he did not escape certain pangs of remorse: he was afraid that she would not have appreciated his motives, and that she might have misconstrued his behaviour. Their first meeting just now had perhaps been somewhat strained: as she came up to the table he felt prompted to reassure her, to convey to her that he bore her no ill-will.

“Well, Miss Hammond, and what have you been doing with yourself?” he began, with a forced jauntiness.

“Oh, nothing wonderful! Just jogging along—same song, same tune.”

"Do you know, I've been intending to come round to look you up for ever so long?"

He looked up at her quickly : he fancied he detected a note of resentment in her voice, and he added hastily—

"I suppose you thought I'd forgotten all about you?"

"Perhaps I didn't think anything at all about it."

He smiled indulgently.

"Come, don't be angry," he continued.

"Angry! I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

"But you're offended with me, I can see."

"What a funny man you are, to be sure, Mr. Perkins!" she retorted.

He felt reassured : they were friends again once more. "Don't go," he went on insinuatingly ; "I want to ask you something."

She paused, leaning her wrists on the table : her lips were expectantly parted.

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"Will you come out with me on Sunday evening?" he asked, lowering his voice.

He expected a coquettish refusal. But she answered simply—

"Certainly, Mr. Perkins."

"Shall we meet, then, at Hyde Park Corner at half-past eight?"

"I shall be very pleased," she answered in the same tone.

"And you don't think too badly of me?"

"But really, Mr. Perkins, I don't think badly of you at all. I'm sure I don't know where you get these funny ideas from."

"I want you to think well of me," he murmured.

She glanced nervously over her shoulder. Behind her an elderly gentleman was impatiently rapping his plate. She moved away, smiling in mock ruefulness.

He lingered for some minutes, affectionately watching her as she flitted to and fro about the room. Once or twice she smiled

back at him sympathetically. And when at length he rose to go, her eyes sparkled upon him with simple, unfeigned pleasure.

He mounted an omnibus, and as the vehicle rumbled on towards Charing Cross, he felt his heart respond in vague exhilaration to all the murky, golden splendour of the glamorous London night.

II

THEY met, greeted each other simply, and turned silently into the Park. Overhead a dark, romantic sky quivered with a myriad glittering stars—an infinity of distant worlds, dimly winking through measureless miles of space.

“What a nice warm evening! It’s quite summery,” she murmured.

He made no answer, but pressing her arm, drew it gently beneath his own.

They crossed the road, and as they turned down the long avenue, beneath the spread-

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ing branches of the great elms, the moon appeared, a monstrous disc of glistening silver, slowly climbing the sky, to preside, as it were, over all the Park. A subdued rumour of decorous footfalls waited on the still night air ; down the stately avenue and beneath the ancient trees the vague silhouettes of countless couples were flitting through the pale moonlight.

Trevor and Emily strolled on. Neither spoke ; now and then he glanced up at the moon, wistfully, while she watched the silently sauntering stream of lovers or the closely locked couples that crowded the benches. By and by he felt her head nestle on to his shoulder, and instinctively he passed his arm around her waist.

“ Dear Miss Hammond ! ” he whispered, bending his face to hers.

“ Oh, Mr. Perkins, don’t be unkind ! ” she answered, gently rebuffing him.

“ Unkind ? But how am I unkind ? ”

“ Don’t be unkind,” she repeated vaguely.

Disconcerted, he looked away from her, and they resumed their walk.

He gazed up at the stars, and tried to lose himself in the wondrous immensity of the firmament, to comprehend the infinite insignificance of human life. And, as his eyes travelled over the great glittering assemblage, he recalled, with a dreamy wonder, the vast range of human aspiration, the persistent progress of scientific achievement, the unflagging effort of each successive generation. And presently an overwhelming sense of the grotesque futility of it all oppressed him. He thought of himself—of his lonely life, of his unsatisfied melancholy, of the bitterness of his experience, of that welling spring of happiness which had been irreparably poisoned. He looked at the girl by his side : their eyes met : her lips parted in a faint, tremulous smile. Ah ! *she* was happy : *she* could not understand this haunting sense of the pitiful hollowness of things !

How fresh and sweet and simple she looked in the pale moonlight ! Could he not, during one short, mad hour, escape from himself?

“Are you not getting tired, Miss Hammond ?” he asked gently.

“Well, I do think we might rest a bit,” she answered.

They walked on, looking about them, for most of the benches seemed already occupied. At last they discovered one that was half empty. A couple—the man was a soldier—was in possession of the one corner ; Trevor and Emily sat down on the other.

All the Park seemed alive with lovers, sauntering in silent embrace beneath the gleaming, full-faced moon. The heavy breath of human love seemed to float through the warm, still, night air ; and now and then from out the distant darkness there sounded a woman’s strident laugh.

“Emily !” he murmured, drawing her towards him.

"Mr. Perkins!" she whispered softly in reply.

"Look up at the stars," he continued.

"Yes, isn't it a fine night?"

"How wonderful to think that they are all different worlds, millions and millions of miles away!"

"Do you think they can see us?" she asked.

"I dare say. Who knows?" he answered dreamily.

"What a spoony lot they must think us!"

He joined in her laugh uneasily. Her remark jarred vaguely upon his sensitivity. And parenthetically he deplored his own fastidious and exacting taste.

They relapsed into silence, while she nestled towards him shyly. He kissed her on the forehead; she made no resistance, but began—

"You know Lottie Blandford, that tall scarecrow of a girl—you know, what serves in the front at our place. She's awfully

jealous of me and you. When you were talking to me the other day in the shop, didn't you notice how she kept edging and trying to catch what you were saying? She's a real mean, spiteful thing—that's what she is. And the other evening I could stand her nasty prying ways no longer, and I says to her straight out . . .”

He let her prattle on, while his thoughts drifted towards profounder things. . . . She looked up to him: she believed in him; she cared for him after her guileless, untutored fashion. By a dozen touchingly feminine movements she had betrayed herself. . . . Was there, then, no response that he could make? Must he let her suffer—suffer as he had suffered? . . . Could he not rather watch over and preserve intact those bright, girlish illusions of hers concerning him? . . . Could he not be kind—yes, infinitely kind: her simple little heart would, he divined, demand but little else. . . . Could he not sacrifice himself, mask

all the bitterness of his cynicism—the tragic aridity of his heart? Would not that, after all, prove a finely modern part?

"Emily," he murmured, drawing her face to his, "dear little Emily."

She laughed—a low, rippling laugh.

"Oh, Mr. Perkins, what a way you have, to be sure!"

"You're no longer cross with me? You don't think badly of me?"

"I sha'n't tell you what I think of you. It might make you think too much of yourself," she answered coquettishly.

"You don't know how lonely, how isolated my life is, Emily."

"Well, I have noticed you seem sort of sad-like and dreadful down on your luck. I don't see why you should be, though. You've a nice position."

"I can't explain to you now, Emily. Some day, perhaps, you'll understand."

"I believe it's reading too many books. I knew a girl who went just the same way.

Trevor Perkins

I never could see the sense of all this book-reading myself."

He laughed gently, assuring himself that such artlessness was quaintly charming.

"Never mind, Emily; you must be patient and bear with me. You will, won't you, Emily, darling?"

She paused, then asked gravely—

"What's up now?"

"If only I had a real friend," he went on dreamily; "an honest, loyal little friend—a friend like you, Emily—a friend who would be patient and bear with me."

"You talk that vague-like, Mr. Perkins, I don't know exactly what to say. I'm sure we're chummy enough."

"Call me Trevor," he whispered.

"I'm a funny sort of a girl," she continued, "but I do like to know where I am with folks. I've kept company before, you know, and I like folks to mean what they say."

"And you don't believe in me—in my sincerity?" he asked bitterly.

"Oh, you're too deep for me, Mr. Perkins," she answered shortly.

"You're not going to quarrel with me, Emily?" he expostulated.

"Oh, Lord! I'm sure I can't see anything to quarrel about. You do jump at things so, Mr. Perkins."

"Then you don't think badly of me after all?"

"You are a rum sort and no mistake," she concluded.

He looked down at her. The moonlight was playing on her face: her skin, he thought, looked white as driven snow, and, all at once, he felt his whole being throb with a mad, passionate yearning. The whole world, so he fancied, swam before his eyes: he took her into his arms, and he kissed her with a fierce and feverish desperation. Yet, even in this wild moment of ecstasy, he retained a vivid consciousness of the relativity of things, and more than ever he realized the profundity of his disillusionment.

"Oh! Trevor dear," she expostulated softly, "I am so happy!"

"Are you, darling?" he answered, with a vague uneasiness.

Then, bending over her, he kissed her again.

"You are a spoony man," she exclaimed with a brusque laugh.

Yet, after all, he debated with himself, why should he tell her that he had no heart to give her? Why should he spoil this short moment of her delight? Why should he not play his part to the end with a desperate and cynical recklessness? . . . And yet—and yet, as the thought formulated itself he felt his better self rise in revolt. She trusted him . . . she loved him, perhaps. . . . And once more the temptation returned.

This time he faced it without flinching. He felt her warm, soft hand steal its way into his, and, with a supreme effort, he determined to be true to his better self.

He became conscious of the return of his self-possession. And all at once he felt strangely cool—master of himself: he realized that he had definitely reconquered his personality.

He seemed to see the vast obscurity of the Park, peopled with a multitude of wandering lovers, and there welled up in his heart that great compassion for the helplessness of humanity of which he had read in books. He understood all the pitifulness of human love, its crude, primitive basis, the curiously blinding glamour of its endless elaboration.

Her head rested on his shoulder, and her hat, pushed all awry, shaded her face from the white light of the moon. Her eyes were closed, her lips listlessly parted, and her plump, girlish frame throbbed in silence with all the tremulous rhythm of her hurried breath. He watched her, and there stole over him a certain subtle pride in his own power of tranquil self-detachment. And

because of this self-satisfaction of his he pitied her vaguely, for the helplessness of her emotion and for the unconsciousness of his own attitude towards her. And, letting his thoughts drift onwards, he brooded aimlessly on the whole fragility of woman.

Yet, a moment later, he heard himself saying to her, with supreme inconsequence—

“Dearest Emily, you do care for me a little?”

She nodded mutely—gave him a long, slow look; then closed her eyes again wearily.

“My own dear little Emily,” he went on, tenderly.

“Dear Mr. Perkins, you don’t mean that?” she murmured.

“Of course I do. You are the whole world to me,” he protested hastily.

For a long while they remained locked in silent embrace. By and by the soldier and the woman at the other end of the bench, rising to go, roused them.

"We must be thinking of moving," he said abruptly.

"Oh, no! Not yet. It's so jolly here!" she answered.

He acquiesced with a strange, sudden impatience, and started to wonder, after his old cynical fashion, how it would all end for him. . . .

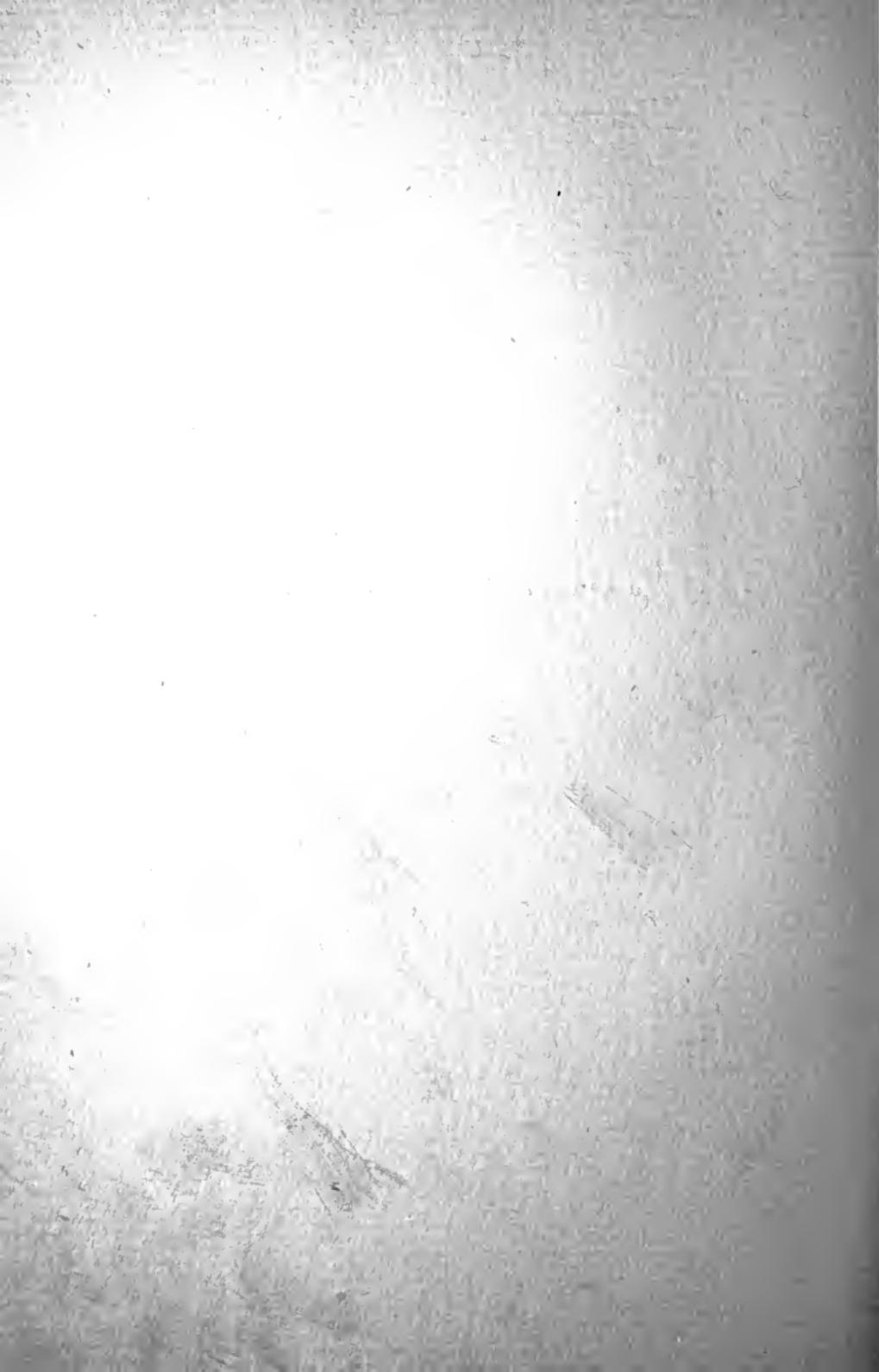
The faint notes of a distant clock tower floated through the still, warm air. . . .

"I really must be getting home," he began five minutes later.

"Oh, dear, must you really?" she asked reproachfully. "What a fidget you are! Why, it's only ten o'clock."

He put his arm around her, she laid her head on his shoulder, and together they moved away slowly down the stately moonlit avenue.

THE TURN OF THE WHEEL



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I

THE city was disgorging.

All along the Strand, down the great, ebbing tide, the omnibuses, a congested press of gaudy craft, drifting westwards, jostling and jamming their tall, loaded decks, with a clanking of chains, a rumble of lumbering wheels, a thudding of quick-loosed brakes, a humming of hammering hoofs. . . .

The empty hansom crept silently past : the street-hawkers—a lengthy row of dingy figures—lined the pavement edge : troops of frenzied newsboys darted yelling through the traffic ; and, here and there, a sullen-faced woman struggled to stem the tide of men.

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Somewhere, behind Pall Mall, unheeded the sun had set : the sky was powdered with dull-crimson dust : one by one the shops gleamed out, blazing their windows of burnished glass : the twilight throbbed with a ceaseless shuffle of hurrying feet ; and over all things hovered the spirit of London's grim unrest. . . .

So Eardley Lingard mused ; leaning his elbows over the cab-doors, relishing complacently the nimbleness of his fancy, savouring every fragile modulation of the dusky pageantry, sedulously enhancing, with the nicety of a virtuoso, the keenness of his exhilaration.

And presently, he anticipated Hilda's joyful reception of the news, and his own pleasure in confiding it to *her*, the first of all. He visioned her quick flush of pride in him : his thoughts lingered almost boastfully on the distinction of her beauty, on her intellectual promise. And he reminded himself how she was *his* daughter, and in no way her mother's. . . .

Then, his thoughts deflected at random towards the future satisfactions of his new position, its easy, congenial routine, the agreeable leisure it would afford him. . . . And a sudden pride in himself, in the intensity of his personality, sparkled within him—pride in his tireless, intellectual vitality, which had set him privileged above the crowd ; respect, too, for the whole course of his double career, commercial and political, rich in accumulated achievement.

His exhilaration quickened : he felt himself buoyant with elasticity, eager for new interests, new possibilities, a new lease of life.

Presently, in St. James's Park, he passed Greaves Chamney, walking homewards. The young man waved his hand with an effusive gesture ; Eardley, smiling back benignly, bethought himself to ascertain how things were between him and Hilda. Chamney had a future before him : his face wore the smooth stamp of success. And his admiration for Hilda was undisguised. But she—

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she, on this point, was still enigmatical, as yet she had given no sign.

* * * * *

When at last she had reached Belgrave Street, and stood beneath the portico fitting the latch-key into the door, he revealed himself a little man, almost insignificant—a white, emphatic forehead; vaguely sunken eyes, alight with a vagrant, incisive flicker; drawn cheeks; a wiry, meagre mouth, well-worn, and hinting at a tale of long effort.

II

IT had been his wife's day at home; and all the afternoon, throughout the long succession of callers, filling and refilling the room—the women, over-clothed and glib; the men, correctly affable—the rumour of his appointment had hovered irresolute. She had listened complaisantly to the string of hinted congratulations, weakly, tremulously smiling; but Hilda had met them

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coldly, with a persistent attitude of tense unconcern, and occasionally, it had seemed, with some show of compressed resentment.

About half-past six the mother and daughter were left alone.

Bessie Lingard remained, staring listlessly before her, her face inertly immobile with fatigue ; her gown of dull-green velvet falling to the carpet in clumsy folds ; her hair tightly parted and braided behind her head in rigid coils, and one hand hanging limp beside her, the fingers loaded with rings, whose stones sparkled in the firelight. . . . An indefinite face ; just now, despite the mellow lamp-light, appearing jaded by the afternoon's effort, absorbed by a hebetude of over-ripe middle-age, a lax and puffy lethargy.

* * * *

A footman brought in an evening paper. She unfolded it nervously.

“They say in an article here that Mr. Bulkeley ought to be appointed.”

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Hilda made no answer, but looked suddenly away from her mother.

"Mr. Bulkeley's worked hard for the party. Perhaps after all he's better claims."

Hilda opened a book at random with a quick, exasperated movement.

"You know I'm going to Tukenton tomorrow, Hilda," Mrs. Lingard began after a pause.

"Are you?" her voice was deliberately hard: she did not look up from her book.

"The new conservatory was finished yesterday. I shall be all alone till the end of the week when Lady Whyte comes. I wish you'd come, Hilda. A little country air would do you good. You've no engagements except the Assheton's ball. You could ride Carlo, and have the Machens and Mr. Walsh over for some tennis." She spoke hurriedly, in an eager tone of forced indifference.

"Of course I can't, mother. How absurd you are! You know Mrs. Mathurin has

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promised to take me." Her head remained buried in her book.

Of a sudden she sprang up.

"There's the hall door. That'll be father."

And she left the room brusquely.

* * * * *

The sound of voices came up from the hall: Eardley's cheery, spontaneous; Hilda's subdued, earnestly confidential. Then the abrupt closing of a door. They had gone together into the library.

She guessed that it was true. And now, down there, in the library, he was telling it to Hilda. . . .

The sting of thwarted curiosity prompted within her—not of a sudden, but insensibly—a dull resentment, a sense of her own isolation, a vague knowledge that Hilda had altogether supplanted her, driven her into the background, transformed her into a person of no consequence.

But from the discomfort of this assertion

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of herself she quietly shrank, relapsed into her former passivity, her incurious acceptance of the plain facts of her life, till, presently, that he should have come to tell her the news first, would have seemed irregular, almost perplexing.

The twenty-five years of her married life, whenever she inadvertently surveyed them, seemed to her so entirely usual, and the conclusion that they had achieved so entirely inevitable, that the musing on them brought no keenness of regret, no sentiment of insufficiency. In her own eyes she appeared precisely fitted for the part she had come to play.

Only occasionally did she shrink from the crudity of Hilda's indifference. To the rest she had become numbed — a middle-aged woman, her sentimentality, long untouched, grown musty; prosaically contented, anticipating little, sluggishly living from day to day.

* * * * *

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She sat on, waiting for Eardley. And her thoughts drifted to Tukenton (where she had lived during the greater part of the year) to certain trivial changes to be made in the garden.

* * * *

By and by they came in together. Hilda's flushed cheeks betrayed that he had been appointed.

He came forward and took both her hands in his, gravely, affectionately. Hilda, she saw, paused behind him embarrassed.

"I've been telling Hilda the good news. You're glad, too, aren't you, Bessie?"

"Of course I am glad, Eardley, very, very glad. Every one was saying this afternoon that it ought to be you. But somehow I never believed it could be true."

He let her hands fall, smiling to himself at his own thoughts.

And she caught a quick glimpse of all that this meant to him, of how, for years, his tireless ambition had been straining towards

this final achievement ; and there came to her out of the past, quite slowly, quite faintly, like the hesitation of a distant rumour, the memory of an evening, years and years ago, when Hilda was a toddling child, when they were poor, and lived in lodgings. He had spoken to her of this jestingly, trying the title on her name. She remembered her word to him just now with a strange impotent yearning to say more, to let him see that she understood, a little.

But Hilda and he were talking together without her.

“What time does it begin ?” he was asking.

“It’s a splendid position for you, Eardley,” she remarked.

He looked across at her, a momentary, scrutinizing glance ; but Hilda interrupted—

“It’s not till nine, dad.”

“Very well, child, order the carriage.”

They were accustomed to settle things without her, but she asked shrinkingly—

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“ You’re going out ? ”

“ Yes,” he answered lightly, “ Hilda is taking me to the play. . . . By the way, Bes sie, are you going to Tukenton to-morrow ? ”

“ Yes, dear. I wrote to Hedges this morning to tell him to meet the 4.45.”

He nodded unconcernedly, and went upstairs to dress.

* * * * *

“ I knew all along that dad would be appointed. He was the only man possible,” Hilda remarked triumphantly.

“ How did you know ? ”

“ Oh ! just instinctively. I was quite certain of it from the first.”

“ But you never said so.”

“ No, I never said so.”

“ I’m afraid Mrs. Bulkeley will be very disappointed.”

Hilda tossed her head contemptuously.

“ Mr. Bulkeley’s simply an ingenious machine. He’s no real intellect. Look at all dad’s done—the way he’s made his career

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from the first—never asked anything of any one."

"Yes, dear, I know," the mother assented vaguely.

For a moment Hilda stood considering her abstractedly, toying with some train of thought.

"Dad says that it's not to be mentioned to any one yet."

"Very well, dear," the other answered meekly. Then added—"It's twenty past seven, Hilda. You'd better go to dress."

The girl went, sauntering deliberately, slightly conscious of her self-possession, rustling with a certain artificial grace her fashionable, elaborately-fitting silk dress.

III

HILDA was three-and-twenty—possessing that cold regularity of feature, which, according to society's facile and conventional standards, passes for beauty; that intelligent

superciliousness of demeanour that passes for obvious superiority.

Women acknowledged her handsomeness freely, praising the delicacy of her complexion, the symmetry of her carriage ; but her mother perceived that, nevertheless, most men she failed to move. Old Lady Whyte—after her trenchant fashion—declared that the girl obtruded her intellectual superiority without tact ; and, moreover, that her persistent insensibility of expression dispelled all feminine charm. And in this summary of the matter her mother had acquiesced limply, with a vague sentiment of helpless, maternal disappointment.

As a child she had promised altogether differently.

For a while, it was as if her physical growth were clumsily draining at her vitality ; she was always pale, and often ailing. Later, it was as if her personality were convulsively struggling to assert itself : she became tormented by a morbid scrupulousness, by

strange fits of persistent, childish, introspection. And, especially, her attitude towards her mother grew freakish; now petulantly, and at times passionately, insurgent, now marked by outbursts of an overwrought, conscientious docility. She developed, too, a fondness for solitude, wandering alone for hours in the garden at Tukenton, chatting to the flowers, telling herself stories concerning the lives of the insects, the birds, the trees. From companionship with children of her own age she would rebelliously escape.

It was to counteract this phase that she was sent to school.

She came home more reticent in manner, more observant of herself, full of a bookish caprice, an exasperated craving for knowledge, and professing a dogmatic scorn for the amusements of her age. She spent her leisure poring over histories; filling notebooks in her attempts to master subjects, working for her school examinations with a zealous and febrile restlessness. Her de-

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votion to her father expanded suddenly into an intense veneration for his ability; she would listen to him earnestly, question him eagerly, absorbing his words. And he took an open pride in her acuteness of apprehension, in teaching her, in furthering her intellectual development. During the holidays they became close companions. She came to understand him, and he to confide in her. With her mother her manner was inattentive.

So, till she was eighteen, till she "came out," as the phrase goes, till she took her place in the world.

Then, with a rapid transition, she appeared to throw off the last remnants of childishness, and definitely to assume consciousness of her rôle.

Now, she dressed elaborately, with a considerable affectation of smartness; cultivated an artificiality of manner, a tone of fashionable frivolity, contrasted with a deliberate, cynical attitude of worldliness, and a habit of shrewd, thoughtful conversation, both sug-

gestive of a mind self-reliant to no common degree.

Her devotion to her father remained undiminished, rather, beneath a more conventional surface, did it take deeper root; and while, as time went on, her mother—seeing her only as she appeared in public—comprehended her less and less; he, on the other hand, was easily able to maintain his old intimacy with her, to keep in touch with the progress of her capricious development.

He saw that she was reasonable rather than sentimental: from her demeanour towards men he surmised that she was endowed with a touch of the virginal temperament; in no way eager for marriage, fastidiously expecting of it a lasting companionship and an intellectual union. He saw, too, that while she appeared content to let the trivialities of society absorb her time, the intimate portions of her mind remained unfrequented: throughout her subserviency to fashion she retained, half-unconsciously, a secret, intellectual liberty.

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He understood how she was frankly eager for life, for a masculine comprehension of the activities of the world ; and, in the keen vitality of her intellect, he recognized, with supreme satisfaction, an echoing of his own personality. The disproportion between her perspicacity and her experience, and continued proofs of the unexpected extent of her bookish knowledge, delighted him ; but, after all, and perhaps quite illogically, he took the greater pride in her personal beauty, and in her skill in bedecking it. For in the confection of her clothes her mother had no voice.

IV

IT was in commerce that Eardley Lingard had made his fortune ; in the House of Commons his reputation. Twenty-seven years ago, at Oxford, he had taken a very brilliant degree. It was supposed that he would read for the bar, for which Jowett had more than once laid emphasis on his special

aptitude. But to the surprise of his friends he had forfeited his fellowship in order to marry—over-hastily, and quite foolishly, it was thought, a pretty-faced, penniless girl. She was the daughter of an Oxford doctor ; he had gone to bid her and her father good-bye ; the girl had burst into a flood of tears. And then, in an impulse of cerebral chivalry (his intercourse with women had been of the slightest) he had engaged himself to her. A month later, during the vacation, they were married unostentatiously at Oxford, and, in lodgings in London, began life together. And he was forced to accept a subordinate situation in the shipping firm of Aitken and Aitken.

His hours at the office were long ; and he made no effort to mitigate their exactions ; concentrated every energy of his intellect on the business ; mastered its details with an astonishing rapidity, left upon everything he touched the impress of his acumen.

It was only at the end of his hard day's

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work that he and his wife met; their relations quickly drifted into daily superficiality.

She was untutored in perception, ingenuously unreceptive, without subtlety of penetration, acquiescing credulously in his superiority. For a long while she remained unconscious of her own inadequacy; she was incapable of appreciating—except through incidents explicitly significant of his neglect (which came later)—the entire lack of mental kinship between them.

* * * * *

So the years slipped by, and her position with regard to him grew to seem altogether natural. Moreover, after Hilda's birth, the care of the child filled her days and her mind. She would have it brought down to the drawing-room, and her friends, when they called, would find her romping on the floor, her hair all dishevelled. Eardley thought her foolish, and told her so; at that time the child interested him little; he had wanted, she

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knew, a boy, though she had no conception of the bitterness of his disappointment.

Then, little by little, so insensibly that she was scarcely aware of its progress, came the change. With the capricious awakening of the child's intelligence, Eardley began to take notice of her, and, occasionally, in the evenings, to read aloud to her, or to tell her fairy tales. His ascendancy over her started to declare itself : towards her mother the child grew less and less responsive, so that before she had perceived how things were drifting, she had already learned to tolerate her isolation.

Meanwhile, old Rupert Aitken, the head of the firm, had detected young Lingard's ability, and had come to repose in him no ordinary confidence. The firm had been in great difficulties : Eardley had somehow retrieved the situation, and shortly afterwards was made a partner—she knew no more than this, for he never talked to her of his work. Hilda was about ten years old when

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Mr. Aitken died : by his will the chief control of the business was left to Eardley. Almost immediately its scope expanded : from a humdrum, old-fashioned concern, it blossomed into a thriving, modern enterprise.

And, all at once, they were rich. They moved to a house in Belgrave Street : he bought Tukenton Court ; and at a bye-election was returned, unopposed, for the county.

Politically, his success was as speedy as it had been commercially. She knew that he had served on committee after committee, on each of which his vitality, his clearness of perception, his power of concentration had accentuated the value of his personality. He was cited in the Press as a coming man.

And now her isolation, from him and from Hilda, grew greater than ever. Each year she became less familiar with him ; living mostly at Tukenton, with old Lady Whyte, an invalid aunt of his, for company ; busying herself with the garden, with tending her pets, with visiting the village poor.

Hilda remained on in Belgrave Street, keeping house for her father ; and three or four times a year they both came to stay at Tukenton, bringing with them a party of guests. Of late, however, his visits had been rare and hurried, and he had appeared strangely white and worn of expression. She had been secretly apprehensive at the double strain of his work—in the City every day, and in the House till late at night,—to which he relentlessly submitted himself. People warned her that he was over-working ; she replied mechanically that she would interfere, but, of course, there was nothing that she could do.

But, henceforward, things would be different. He was to be made a peer ; he had said, too, that he contemplated retiring from active participation in the business. Yet so firm was her habit of her life grown, that it was only with an apathetic content that she looked forward to the future. . . .

V

ON the Tuesday she went down to Tuken-ton—alone with her maid. Hilda remained with her father in London : there was no further proposal that she should leave him.

The mother and daughter were not to meet again for a month ; but their parting was perfunctory—a stereotyped effusion of household affection. Hilda had an appointment with her dressmaker, which prevented her from going to the station.

The Assheton's ball was on Friday ; and Hilda, after her mother had gone, wrote, at her father's suggestion, to ask Mrs. Mathurin to dinner. It was Mrs. Mathurin, who, though no relation, only an old friend, frequently chaperoned her ; and on several previous occasions, it had seemed pleasant that she should come to dine in Belgrave Street beforehand.

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Hilda was still upstairs dressing, and Eardley alone in the drawing-room, glancing through an uncut novel, when she was announced.

He noticed at once that she was in black—a massive dress of black satin—that she wore in her hair a large diamond star; and he remembered how he had once said to her that these suited her admirably. As he crossed the room to meet her, he thought she looked more resplendent than ever, in all the richness of her exuberant maturity. He grasped her hand, thanking her for the warm letter of congratulation she had written him.

She read his undisguised admiration: her face flushed beneath her heavy, dark hair: he had not looked at her so for many months.

"I feel so proud of you, Eardley," she said, seating herself on the sofa. "You're going to retire from business, too?"

He nodded, standing on the hearthrug

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smiling, with his hands behind his coat-tails. Beside her his smallness of stature seemed accentuated.

"I'm immensely glad. You were over-working yourself terribly. Now you'll have lots of leisure," she added.

He nodded again, looking at her curiously, half-closing his eyes, quickly, with a trick that was habitual to him.

He was wondering how marvellously she had managed to preserve her youth, computing that at least she must be five-and-forty. At moments she possessed the stately luxuriance of a portrait by Rubens with a suggestion of latent passion in the full-veined, almost muscular firmness of her throat. The heaviness of her chin, though it lent, in certain light, a coarseness to her face, in others betokened an almost animal-like tenacity of purpose, a stubborn consciousness of desire. She was large-limbed and massive and dark; and while she sat fanning herself with a slow deliberation, breathing a little

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heavily, the opulent folds of her dress half-filled the sofa around her.

“How is dear Hilda?” she asked.

“She’ll be down presently.”

“And Bessie, when did she go?”

“On Tuesday.

“Dear Bessie, how strange of her to go away, just now of all times.” She spoke in a tone of smooth patronage.

He shrugged his shoulders imperceptibly.

A sound of rustling came from the stairs : it was Hilda.

“When will you come to tea, Eardley?” she asked hurriedly.

“Not this week. I shall be in the City till late every day.”

“Monday?”

The door opened. He nodded.

She rose to greet Hilda, kissing her effusively.

“It was sweet of you to come.”

“You’re looking perfectly lovely, dear.”

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Dinner was announced. Eardley gave Mrs. Mathurin his arm.

* * * *

During dinner the conversation flagged repeatedly. Mrs. Mathurin talked persistently of literature, addressing herself to Eardley, a little loudly, in complacent condemnation of the feebleness of contemporary productions. Hilda tried ineffectually to turn the topic, perceiving that her father was inattentive and tired ; but Mrs. Mathurin passed glibly to French poetry, ruthlessly mangling the titles of books.

Afterwards, in the drawing-room, Hilda, with intuitive tact, sat down before the piano. She played a series of Strauss waltzes—facile, sensuous airs, which she knew always pleased her father, and whenever for a moment she paused, Mrs. Mathurin begged her to continue, and when she had finished, praised her playing with an excessive effusion, exclaiming how she adored the old simple tunes.

Then, while Mrs. Mathurin lingered with

her father, she went upstairs to put on her cloak. As she came back into the drawing-room, their conversation ceased : she thought it was of her that they had been talking.

In the brougham, Mrs. Mathurin complimented her on the scheme of her dress, and offered her a seat in her box at the Opera, suggesting that she should persuade her father to escort her, and adding, in a tone of assumed carelessness, that Greaves Chamney would be there. Hilda reddened in the obscurity of the carriage, and hastily protested some vague previous engagement. Mrs. Mathurin was pressing her, when the carriage stopped.

VI

THE ball-room was ablaze with light : the floor shook with a prismatic whirling of high-keyed tints—pale blue, and green, and rose—of bare arms and shoulders, gleaming white against the men's black coats.

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Hilda at once perceived Greaves Chamney standing in the doorway. He came towards her : she took his arm. They danced a turn or two, jostling through the throng.

"What a crush !" he remarked, "let's go and find a seat."

He pushed his way through the onlookers, she clinging to his arm, and up the stairs. They turned the landing, and sat down alone and out of sight. From below, through the buzz of conversation, and the loud iteration of the butler's voice announcing the guests, drifted the muffled strains of the string band.

"You came with Mrs. Mathurin, I suppose ?" he asked.

"Yes, she dined with us first."

"Your mother's gone to Tukenton, then ?"

"Yes," she answered, unconscious of the train of his thoughts.

"How's your father ?"

"He's dreadfully overworked. He needs a long rest."

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"Yes, but he'll want some absorbing occupation : he's been accustomed to it all his life."

The music ceased : the buzz of voices swelled, and the couples came crowding up the staircase. He rose to let them pass, standing against the wall.

She was thinking that he was handsome beyond a doubt—with his keen, decisive profile ; graceful, too, in his well-built clothes. There was something elusive, impenetrable, about his faultlessly smoothed hair ; the firm lines of his smile. She wondered if she really knew him. . . .

Yet it was for that very impenetrableness of his that she admired him : it was that which had first made her curious concerning him, conscious of his ability : she had judged it a sign of strength. He was looking down at her fixedly : she guessed that he had resolved to propose to her to-night ; and she meditated without agitation on the manner he was likely to adopt.

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He had seated himself again beside her : but the music started almost immediately.

" You'll give me another dance ? " he asked, fingering her programme.

She handed him the pencil. He bracketed two numbers, writing his initials opposite them deliberately. Then, after an instant, included a third, without comment. And they went back into the ball-room.

As she stood with another partner, exchanging commonplaces concerning the details of the dance, she noticed him on a sofa in a corner beside Mrs. Mathurin ; talking to her at his ease, with his head thrown back. Mrs. Mathurin was gazing in her direction, thoughtfully. It was of her that they were speaking, she suspected, and she turned away hastily.

She liked Greaves Chamney : he interested her : he was brilliant : he would succeed at the Bar, her father had said so often : he was standing for Parliament at the next election. She had been ready to accept him, almost

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from the first : she had contentedly, without perturbation, let things drift towards this proposal : she had grown to imagine herself his wife with familiarity—the details of their companionship, the groove of their common life. But, as the moment drew near, at the vision of him talking to Mrs. Mathurin, at his ease, with his head thrown back, there crept over her a curious, wayward repulsion : she felt doubtful, apprehensive, afraid, scared lest, after all, he had imposed himself upon her. She shrank from the prospect of coming to a decision, longing to take counsel of some one —her father, but he wanted her to marry Greaves Chamney ; she had suspected that long ago. . . .

Then Stephen Walsh's figure entered her mind—his slow, open face, his dog-like look following her. . . .

And she knew instinctively that *he* loved her in a different way. . . .

Mechanically, she went through the routine of the succeeding dances. At last his turn

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came. He was moving towards her, smiling his smooth smile. She felt herself smiling too : she took his arm, half admiring his self-possession, and half resenting it. As they crossed the room she rapidly imagined herself married to the other—a prosperous country life ; eventless wealth ; isolation from the pulse of London ; the round of county society ; their evenings together ; his commonplace comments on the contents of the day's paper, on the incidents of his day's sport.

* * * *

And, somehow, she was still curious concerning the manner he would adopt.

“ It's cooler in the conservatory : this place is like an oven.”

His suggestion nettled her. That he should choose the conservatory seemed almost a personal slight : the twilight of the place, its unexpected seats beneath the dim shadows of the palms, appeared stupidly sentimental. She glanced at him critically, asking herself a little bitterly if he would begin by begging

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permission to call her by her Christian name. They sat down; and she waited for him to speak.

“I want you, Hilda, to be my wife.” He uttered the words quietly, in his usual, even voice; but, through the obscurity, she was conscious that his gaze was concentrated upon her.

“My practice is fast growing. Next year I shall be in Parliament. I know you like me as a friend: we have seen a great deal of each other: we have already much in common. For three years I have been working for you, almost ever since I have known you——”

He paused, and since she did not speak—

“Perhaps you would rather not give me a reply now. You would rather wait?”

She was busy framing her answer, when he continued—

“Yes, I think you would rather wait——”

She felt the touch of his hand on hers: she resisted feebly. He was leaning forward

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gazing into her face. She laughed weakly : she thought he smiled in response : she knew that he was waiting for her to speak.

"We will wait," she heard herself saying, "and see. You are right. . . . I would rather wait. . . . I do not know——"

He clasped her hand gratefully : she surmised that the tension of his emotion had snapped ; that, for the moment, he was content with her answer.

From the ball-room floated the languorous phrase of a waltz-tune. Her blood tingled ; and a contradictory consciousness that he had attained this understanding with her with entire ease, and that, had he insisted, he could have achieved more, galled her not a little. All at once she found herself full of an intense longing to end the situation, to escape from the obscurity of the conservatory, from him.

"Would you tell me what the time is ?" There was a note of strained ceremony in her voice.

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He looked at his watch and answered—
“Twenty past one.”

“Twenty past one! Oh! I must go at once. I'd no idea it was so late. I promised Mrs. Mathurin to come at one.”

His gesture of expostulation was almost imperceptible. Then he had offered her his arm, and was leading her across the room.

“I'm so sorry to have kept you. But I'm quite ready to come now,” she exclaimed.

Mrs. Mathurin looked from one to the other meaningfully, and rose, smiling.

Greaves Chamney escorted them to the carriage.

On the way home, no reference to him passed; and Hilda sat, for the most part, silent. But when they parted, Mrs. Mathurin bid her good-night with an affectation of discretion, and emphasized affection.

And Hilda drove on to Belgrave Street, alone, ill-at-ease, dissatisfied with herself.

* * * *

VII

THE following afternoon she received a letter from him, in which he assumed an indefinite understanding between them, and insisted on his love for her in lengthy, symmetrical, slightly elaborate phrases. The letter, which she read carefully, left her unmoved, as his proposal had done. And she vaguely took for granted that in the course of time she would marry him, rating herself grown cold of temperament, unattracted by men, deliberately deciding that she was insensible to the ordinary agitations of love.

Not that she had never experienced the sentimental imaginings of girlhood. There had been a period when she was continually fancying herself enthralled, now by one man, now by another. But these phases of exaltation had all proved quite transient: the ardour of each secret attachment had in turn gently faded. One after another she

recalled them all ; and because it was now more than eighteen months since the extinction of the most recent of them, she judged them mere school-girl vapourings, which, coming into womanhood, she had outgrown. And in explanation of her apathetic attitude toward Greaves Chamney, and of her matter-of-fact acceptance of him, she referred, with hasty confidence, to her own experience of society, which, she argued, had given her glimpses enough of the practical success of make-shift marriage bargains. Besides, life with him promised to be full of interest ; his companionship was stimulating ; and there would be the progress of his success, the glamour of which she would enhance and share.

And to the event of the ceremony, too, she looked forward. It was pleasant to plan its details—a fashionable wedding, at St. Peter's, Eaton Square ; seven bridesmaids ; a full choral service ; and a crowded reception afterwards.

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A honeymoon on the Riviera ; and then the life in London resumed. But on a larger, freer scale—mistress of her own house entertaining her own guests, collecting about her a brilliant circle of distinguished men.

In the course of her social engagements she met Greaves Chamney frequently. He would discuss political and other gossip with her, maintaining a certain serious deference of tone, and permitting himself no more familiarity than the ease of well-tried friendship. When they were alone, he occasionally called her by her Christian name ; but he refrained, with a rare tact she thought, from any semblance of a caress.

And the faultless discretion of his attitude reconciled her to him more and more, though she still shrank from mentioning, even to her father, the tacit understanding between them.

VIII

THE butler announced him — “Lord Lingard of Tukenton.”

Across the familiar, ornate drawing-room, she smiled at him with an obvious, suppressed eagerness. Cynically, he guessed that the new-sounding title had moved her.

“How sweet of you to come, Eardley. I’ve said ‘not at home to any one;’ so we can have a real, long chat. You’ll have some tea?”

He pictured to himself how she had been sitting there, all the afternoon, pretending to read, waiting for him; and uneasily he saw what was coming.

“Thanks; no sugar.”

“It’s ages since I’ve seen anything of you. You’ve been so dreadfully busy.”

And the conversation dragged on with a clumsy pleasantness, in a vein of uncomfort-

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able pretence. He was apprehensive of a pause.

At last it came.

* * * * *

“I’ve been so unhappy all these months, Eardley,” she began.

He bent towards her, simulating a surprised concern.

“I felt so that you and I were somehow drifting apart.”

He dissented soothingly.

“My life is so lonely——”

He rapidly recalled her social activity, her routine of busy pleasure. The role of Ariadne, he thought, was singularly unbecoming to her.

“Society is so hollow——”

He assented suavely, smiling imperceptibly. The false note she had adopted was irksome to him. And for the rest he waited with some impatience.

“Life is so difficult. . . . If only I knew how to please you?”

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"But, my dear Bertha——" he expostulated.

"You've never understood how I worship you—your wonderful personality. Sometimes I am terribly afraid about the future—I am afraid I am growing old. All these months I have been waiting for you to come back to me."

The disparity between her phrase and her air of prosperous maturity impressed him, in his irritation, as melodrama grown grotesque. He noticed her want of tact, and how blindly she was effacing that odd, florid charm of hers, which in the past had attracted him towards her. And, at the prospect of her insistence, he let her continue.

And the suavity of his manner intensified.

* * * *

Suddenly, she understood how it was.

"You have no heart, Eardley," she broke out, bitterly. "If I only knew how to please you. . . . I would do anything. . . ."

Her cry of humiliation touched him.

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"I am so sorry, Bertha. Cannot we still be friends—old, dear friends?"

The words sounded like a stereotyped formula. He regretted them immediately, but she did not seem to have heard them.

Mechanically he took up a book, and began to turn over its pages; then, lest the action should appear to her brutally callous, replaced it hastily.

She was gazing at him fixedly. Her expression had grown listless and heavy: her face seemed to have aged strangely.

"My poor Bertha——" he began.

At the sound of his voice—his tone was very tender—the drawn lines about her mouth slackened. He saw that she still hoped. Out of pity for her, he had not the courage to undeceive her. He took her hand.

"I did not mean to pain you. . . . I did not know how it was. . . . I have been very overwrought. . . . I am not quite myself."

Impulsively she lifted his hand to her lips.

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He flushed almost angrily: the situation was intolerable.

"Hilda tells me we are to come to the Opera with you on the 13th."

"You will come? . . . How good you are to me, Eardley."

A few minutes later he took leave of her, pressing her hand warmly.

In the street, as he walked home, he realized that her personality was growing definitely distasteful to him.

* * * * *

And she sat on in her ornate drawing-room, goading herself with hope into an uneasy belief that, after all, he would come back to her.

IX

IT was a summer afternoon. The butler had wheeled Lady Whyte's invalid chair on to the gravel before the porch, and, since luncheon, she and Lady Bessie Lingard had been sitting there.

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The Dutch flower-beds, glowing in the sunlight, heaped lumpy patches of live colour about the velvety lawn : the persistent whirring of a mowing-machine filled the stillness of the air ; and, beyond the garden, through a gap in the bank of rhododendrons, one caught a glimpse of the country-side—the well-upholstered undulations of the English midlands.

Lady Whyte, wrapped in her shawls, sat alertly surveying the landscape ; her face retaining, despite the tufts of white hair protruding beneath her cap, a wizened precision of glance, a firm consciousness of expression. Presently, briskly adjusting her spectacles, she recommenced the clicking of her knitting-needles.

“When does Hilda arrive, Bessie ?”

“She will be here almost directly.”

“How long did you say she is coming for ?”

“I don’t know—only till Monday, I expect.”

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She nodded sententiously, pursing her lips.

“I shall talk to her,” she exclaimed tartly.

Bessie Lingard started. The *Queen* that lay on her lap slipped on to the gravel.

“I shall talk to her, I say—— The way that girl behaves, Bessie, is perfectly odious.”

“But, Caroline, it isn’t right that you should.”

“I know it’s not my business, but I shall do it, I say. The way she neglects you!”

“Please, Caroline, promise me you won’t—— It would altogether upset me. . . . I don’t know what I should do. . . . It will all come right some day. . . . I feel it will,” she added, half to herself.

“I think matters are growing worse and worse. She goes everywhere with that Mrs. Mathurin. It’s abominable of Eardley.”

The scattered sheets of the newspaper flapped in the breeze. Bessie stooped mechanically to collect them.

“You know you can do no good. It’s

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cruel of you, Caroline, to persist in talking like this."

"I tell you, I think Eardley's going to the House of Lords, and especially his retiring from business, the worst possible thing." And she set her knitting-needles clicking with renewed vigour.

"And I suppose that woman is everlastingly at Belgrave Street?—"

There was no answer: she turned her head sharply, scrutinizing the suffering on the other's face.

"There, there, Bessie. . . . I'm a cantankerous old woman. . . . But this whole business makes my blood boil for you—to see you going on submitting year after year like this. Sometimes I feel as if I must speak out—" And, as the other winced audibly, she added: "No, not to Eardley, I don't mean that. But to Hilda."

"It will all come right some day," Bessie repeated feebly.

Lady Whyte began a fresh inspection of

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the landscape, while the mother's eyes, listless with dull pain, mechanically followed the movements of the two gardeners, crossing and re-crossing the far end of the lawn.

Five minutes later, the sound of approaching wheels drowned the whirring of the mowing-machine: the landau swung round the sweep, and Hilda, wearing a mannish travelling dress, stepped out, her lips parted in a small artificial smile.

X

IN her room on the dressing-table she found a bowlful of roses. She guessed that it was her mother, and not the maid, who had arranged them. She sat down before the glass, burying her face in the flowers. A wave of weakness seemed to sweep over her: of a sudden, she felt strangely heavy-headed. Hot tears started to her eyes—why she could not tell: she only knew that to cry was a vague relief. . . .

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And then it passed. She brushed away the traces hurriedly, settled her hat on her head, and went downstairs. In the hall a thrill of glad expectation reminded her that to-morrow morning she would have a letter from her father.

A saddled horse was being led away down the drive, and a man's figure was seated by the tea-table with her mother and Lady Whyte. She guessed at once that it was Stephen Walsh.

She greeted him with a well-simulated air of casual friendliness : he responded with the masculine stiffness that was habitual to him.

The conversation flickered : he, trying clumsy civilities ; her mother, listless and silent ; Lady Whyte allusively hostile. The old lady's sarcastic inferences stung Hilda to resentment : once or twice she replied almost rudely : Lady Whyte merely lifted her eyebrows in nettled contempt. Stephen Walsh awkwardly handled his tea-cup ; and Hilda turned defiantly to chat airily to her mother.

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Lady Whyte declared abruptly that the air was growing chilly. The butler appeared, and as the man wheeled her back into the house, the others walked beside her chair. Hilda lingered by the porch, fingering the jasmine creeper.

A minute later Stephen Walsh joined her.

"It's 'Bijou' you're riding?" she remarked.

"Yes, he's improved wonderfully since you last saw him. I've had him out at grass. Have you been riding at all in London?"

"No, only once or twice. What have you been doing with yourself?" She stood still by the porch, in a graceful attitude, toying with the creeper.

"Oh, nothing much — haymaking," he answered, laughing. "I promised your mother I'd see Bloxam about some rose-cuttings. Will you come as far as the greenhouse?"

She assented, and they strolled together across the lawn.

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"We might have a gallop to-morrow on the old race-course."

"No, I don't think so. . . . I'll see."

"You'll stay for the bazaar at Courtlands, I suppose?"

"No, I'm going back on Monday."

The gardener met them by the coach-house. While Stephen Walsh talked to him, she went into the stables. When he joined her there, she was in the loose-box, feeding her pony from her hand.

They moved across to 'Bijou,' who stood, still saddled, hitched to the pillar-reins.

"Take care," he called, "he's as tricky as ever."

"He's still dangerous to ride?"

"No, we've got used to one another now." She admired him for thus taking his own courage for granted.

Then they visited the three carriage-horses in turn. The coachman came in, and talked a moment to Stephen with deferential familiarity.

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They walked home through the kitchen-garden.

His companionship—the harmoniousness of his contented interest in the natural incidents of his existence—was very restful to her. She forgot how he was in love with her, how he was waiting to plead with her again. Realizing his slow, masculine simplicity, in an impulse of intimate friendliness, that was almost sisterly, her heart warmed towards him. She was grateful to him, too, because his open, English face made her instinctively conscious of the sure stability of his attitude towards her.

He stooped to pick some strawberries, piling them in the palm of his hand ; and they sat down on a garden-seat.

The blackbirds cluttered, chasing one another through the currant-bushes. He went to gather her some more fruit : while he was away, she remembered Greaves Chamney, and wondered a little maliciously, if he could be jealous. . . . He was returning towards

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her. . . . She noted his straight, athletic figure. . . . In his simple way, she mused, he would be very faithful to her. . . .

Presently he took her hand, and the firmness of his grasp thrilled her. And then, suddenly, without a word, his arms were about her: she felt the rough touch of his moustache: the blood rose fast to her cheeks: she perceived that his face was all distraught with emotion.

"Hilda, . . . my darling Hilda," he stammered.

She found herself smiling easily at his confusion.

"Tell me there is some chance for me?"

"Do you really care so much?"

"You know how I love you with all my might. I would slave every hour to make you happy. . . . I'm not clever, I know that: I'm countrified, and can't talk about books and things. . . . But I'd give up everything. . . . We'd live in London, if you liked——"

He stopped short. She was shaking her

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head slowly ; but there were tears in her eyes.

“Then there is some one else ?”

She nodded gravely.

A minute later she glanced at him. He looked so dazed, that her heart grew full of impulsive pity for him. She rose ; and they turned in silence, back towards the house.

Before the door he bid her good-bye hastily. When he was gone, she thought she comprehended, with a vague bitterness, how good a husband he would have made her. . . . And with doses of self-pity she assuaged her irresolution.

XI

. . . THE proposal, but for his kissing her passionately, would, she mused, have been quite commonplace. . . .

She dropped to sleep, dreaming blurred dreams of him. Then, all at once, found

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herself awake, thinking with a strange, searching lucidity. . . .

. . . She seemed to see herself clearly—not clever, only intelligent; selfish, lacking in sympathy, absorbed by the insignificant mechanism of her own experience, groping at random amid a world which she did not understand, and believing the while in the superiority of her own penetration. . . .

And against the intellectual limitation of her girlhood she rebelled, jealous of men, feverishly longing to probe the real meanings of things. . . .

By and by she fell to brooding on her father, on that worn expression of his; and a tremulous, emotional remorse welled up within her. The fineness of his nature, appearing, as it did to her, so aloof from the pettiness of the world, filled her with a fearful pity for him—an indefinable dread lest some harm should happen to him. A score of intimate tokens of his love for her flitted through her mind: she felt hotly

ashamed that she had not requited him more worthily.

She thought of him as a young man, unsparing of his strength, fighting his way upwards, carving his career, by dint of sheer superiority of fibre : she imagined long years of unflinching, self-denying ambition. She remembered his words to her, when he had first told her the news of his peerage : "I'm glad, child, to think that it makes you so happy." And now that his work was accomplished, she was anxiously impatient for his life to be full of sunshine ; planning how she would try to merge her own pleasures in the effort to please him, to prove herself continually thoughtful for him, to make the days of his leisure altogether pleasant. And when, some day, she was married, he and she should be together as much as ever.

When she got back to Belgrave Street (and, parenthetically, she resolved to go on Sunday night) she would tell him about Greaves : that, she knew, would make him

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glad. He was fond of Greaves : he believed in his coming success ; and now that she thought of them together, she saw how much they were alike. . . .

Stephen Walsh—poor fellow ! He was very miserable now, she supposed : he was the sort of man to take it badly—not to show it, but to nurse it in his heart, for years, stubbornly. . . . And, perhaps, after all, life with him would have been pleasant.

. . . How strange, when one reflected upon it, was his kissing her like that—he, so ill-at-ease, so *gauche* with women. . . . To love like that—to be carried right out of oneself . . . she tried to realize it . . . it was very strange . . . and yet, and yet, to possess that power over a man, to be able to command him by a word, a look, and the while to retain complete control over oneself . . . yes, she would be kind to him . . . she would ride with him to-morrow . . . she would send him a note by the groom—a casually-worded note which would show him

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she still wished to be friends with him as before. . . .

And Greaves—she could not imagine him kissing her so. . . . Oh! but after all, what was the use of thinking over the big things of life? . . . And, turning on her pillow, she sank again to sleep.

* * * *

XII

SHE was talking volubly, indiscriminately, of the jealousies with which she had to contend at the theatre, of the obstinacy of the author, of the small-mindedness of the manager; feverishly pacing the tiny boudoir, her sallow cheeks delicately flushed, her dark eyes dilated till they seemed to fill all her face. Eardley sat on a sofa, his legs crossed, alternately surveying her and puffing reflectively at his cigarette. The movements of her slim, supple figure—they were suave as a cat's—seemed, as she crossed and re-crossed

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in front of him, to attain a definite symbolization of that tense and neurotic restlessness, dubbed modern — an hysterical caging of spasmodic and inadequate emotion. And the softly lit room, through the blue haze of smoke, completed his impression — the Japanese prints hanging against a Morris wall-paper ; exotic, Eastern objects piled beside large sheaves of theatrical photographs ; severely mediæval furniture, backed by hangings of Liberty silk.

“ You’re a wonderful creature——” he interrupted deliberately.

She halted abruptly before him, irresolute, impulsively weighing his words.

“ Do you really think that, after all, I shall make a great actress ? ”

“ Perhaps . . . perhaps . . . I dare say . . . that’s not what I meant.”

She sank into an armchair ; he let his gaze wander slowly once again round the boudoir till at length it rested on her figure.

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"Talk to me," she began eagerly, "about myself. Tell me why I'm wonderful."

"No—you wouldn't understand."

"Why are you so exasperating?"

"Go on telling me about your childhood, out there in Melbourne."

"Oh! I can't. The other things have driven it all out of my head. Besides, it's so long ago. It's all dull and stupid, and I've forgotten it. . . . Do you know what some people would say if they knew you were here at this time of night?" she added mischievously.

"They would repeat, very properly, what I remarked just now."

"I often wonder," she began after a pause, during which he was occupied in lighting another cigarette,—"I often wonder if you are in love with me, or if——"

"So do I, Nina, often."

"You'd have no business to——"

"Nor you to receive me, alone, at a quarter to twelve."

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“I should like to feel certain of you.”

“Yes, that’s natural.”

“Do you know, I’m a little afraid of you sometimes.”

“Ah !”

“Not exactly afraid of you, but afraid of your coolness. And yet I sometimes feel half sorry for you.”

“Yes, I understand that.”

“You always say you understand. It makes it very hard to talk to you.”

“Why, shouldn’t it make it easier ?”

“No, it doesn’t ; you seem to judge me so hardly.”

“And just now ?”

“Yes, occasionally you pay me mysterious compliments. But I never know what you mean. I should like enormously to know whether——”

“Well ?”

“Well whether, for instance, you consider me respectable.”

“I’ve never considered the matter.”

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"But if your wife knew that you came here as you do."

"My wife and I have been married twenty-five years."

"You think it's bad form of me to mention your wife?"

"I think it characteristic of you."

"Then you think me bad form?"

"I told you just now what I thought of you."

"And you really think it?"

"There was no need for me to say it otherwise. You did not expect it."

"I adore frankness."

"Of course."

"But every one doesn't."

"Yes, whenever it's agreeable."

"Charlie Strudwicke dined here this evening," she broke off.

He made no answer ; he was relighting his cigarette.

"He made me a passionate proposal."

"Really. He's a very foolish young man."

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“ Foolish because he adores me, and decent enough to ask me to marry him,” she retorted hotly.

“ On the contrary, that’s the most creditable thing I’ve heard of him.”

“ He’s a dear, good boy.”

“ Let me congratulate you.”

“ But I refused him.”

“ On having refused him.”

She bit her lip ; then resumed.

“ Is Miss Lingard returned to town ? ”

“ Yes, she came this evening.”

“ I’ve been wanting to ask you a favour—to do me a little kindness. Only—only I’m afraid you might refuse. . . .”

“ Then wouldn’t it be better not to ask it ? ”

“ You can guess what it is ? ”

He nodded gravely.

“ And you won’t ? ”

“ Not at present.”

“ Some day ? ”

“ Perhaps.”

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She rose, and walked impatiently across the room.

"If you were any one else, I should hate you."

"I am sorry," he said, rising. "Think a little, and you will understand why, and then you will be less angry with me. Good-night."

"You must go?" she asked, in a voice of forced carelessness.

"It is past twelve."

"Good-night," she answered, turning up the lamp, and standing with her back towards him.

Slipping his crush-hat under his arm, he went. She caught his reflection in a mirror as he opened the door; his face wore a pleasant, impassive expression.

XIII

HE walked home through St. James's Park. A sullen glow throbbed overhead ! golden will o' wisps threaded the shadowy groupings of gaunt-limbed trees, and the dull, distant rumour of feverish London waited on the still, night air. The lights of Hyde Park Corner, blazing like some monster, gilded constellation, shamed the dingy stars ; and across the East flared a sky-sign—a gaudy, crimson arabesque. . . .

And all the air hung draped in the mysterious, sumptuous splendour of a murky London night. . . .

As he walked, his thoughts strayed back complacently to the scene in Nina Whittingham's boudoir : he surveyed himself playing upon her personality, as upon some delicate, responsive instrument, and, convincing himself of his ascendancy over her, reviewed each detail of her penetrating charm. . . At fifty,

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he told himself with elation, he was ready to begin life again, to wander afresh about the wide garden of emotional experience, and, remembering his youth—a barren period of unflagging toil—he looked back on it with a contemptuous, and almost rancorous, regret.

In no way timorous of experience, and without misgiving concerning the sureness of his discrimination, he dwelt, with a quickening, courageous exhilaration, upon the consciousness of his magnetic ascendancy over women, and jading the satisfactions of his ambition, till he had come to regard them as a senseless accumulation of deceptive effort, hailed exultantly the freedom of his leisure.

His thoughts reverted to Nina Whittingham: he foresaw each successive stage of his domination over her—a whole vague, subtle *liaison*, discreet, infinitely stimulating. . . .

And he felt boyishly expectant of the future; confidently awaiting a prescriptive enjoyment of women. He thought of Bessie, with a compassionate affection that was mildly soothing,

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resolving to write to her that evening and to run down to Tukenton before long—there were addresses of congratulation from his constituents, and a presentation of some kind from the county ; of Bertha Mathurin, too, of those drawn lines about her mouth that destroyed her attractiveness, with a certain compunction, reminding himself she still was stubbornly hoping. . . .

To-morrow, for the first time, he was to speak in the Lords : sardonically, he be-thought himself of the dreary lack of humour of English politics . . . of the age grown strangely picturesque ; of the rich, enfeebled by monstrous ease ; of the shivering poor, clamouring nightly for justice ; of a helpless democracy, vast revolt of the ill-informed ; of priests, striving to be rational ; of sentimental moralists protecting iniquity ; of middle-class princes ; of sybaritic saints ; of complacent and pompous politicians ; of doctors, hurrying the degeneration of the race ; of artists, discarding possibilities for limitations ; of

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press-men, befooling a pretentious public ; of critics, refining upon the 'busman's methods : of inhabitants of Camberwell chattering of culture ; of ladies of the pavement, aping the conventionality of nonconformist circles. . . .

And, leaving the Park, he mused almost sentimentally on the great, dreamy town ; on her myriad, fleeting moods ; on the charm of her portentous provinciality ; and realizing the vitality of his imagination, reconsidered Nina Whittingham and her attitude towards him. . . .

XIV

SHE told her father of her engagement. They were to be married, it was settled, in the autumn : every morning came letters and notes of congratulation. She let herself drift with the current of events, busying her mind with a hurried accumulation of trifles, shrinking instinctively from a probing of her emotions.

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She wrote to her mother ; and received in reply an agitated letter, full of anxious, maternal doubtings, and of tremulous wishes, and concluding with a suggestion that she and Greaves should come down to Tukenton from a Saturday till Monday.

The letter left upon her an uncomfortable, disturbing impression, reviving, as it did, an echo of her original misgivings, so that she resented unreasonably its tactless tone, and blamed her mother for not viewing the matter with that sincere, unquestioning satisfaction which her father had displayed.

Greaves Chamney came constantly to dine in Belgrave Street : they had not a few little genial dinners, all three together, during which she noted the dilatation of her father's liking for the young man.

With Greaves, whenever he and she were alone, it was of the practical details of the future that they talked—of houses, of furniture, of servants ; but occasionally lapsing into either a flippant sentimentalism, or a forced

sententious attitude towards one another. He petted her with *verve*, with discernment ; made her momentarily forget that feeling of uneasiness, which was to return directly she had parted with him.

Mechanically, she grew accustomed to his mood ; but familiarity with his several aspects brought her no sense of unconstraint. Rather, on the contrary, did it rigidly confine her within the strict limits of her *rôle* as his *fiancée*. Their engagement, in its intimacy, was altogether unromantic ; for which, somehow, she felt she was responsible. To be altogether at her ease with him was more than she could compass : there lurked always, in the background of her mind, the shadowy sentiment that he had imposed himself upon her. . . . So, in the superficial companionship of her girl friends, she took refuge.

Since the night of the Asshetons' ball Mrs. Mathurin had not been once to Belgrave Street. Hilda guessed it was because, almost at the last moment, her father had remembered

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an important previous engagement which he had overlooked, and was unable to go to the Opera as he had promised. Once, a fortnight later, she passed her in the Park, looking, so she thought, tired and worn ; and she heard that in August she was going to Aix.

Her mother's letters contained casual references to Stephen Walsh ; evidently, the outward routine of his life was in no way disordered : he was busy as before with the horses and his gardening . . . and yet, and yet, she wondered, she wondered. . . .

Her father at this time was in splendid spirits : he appeared to be growing visibly younger day by day. The season was flaunting its crowded, glittering close : he and Hilda were to be seen almost everywhere together—in the Row in the morning (he had taken to riding again) ; under the Achilles statue in the late afternoon ; at dinners, receptions, balls. Her beauty, discarding its former insensibility, seemed to have blossomed into an exuberant expression of radiant hap-

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piness. And the women who knew her, sentimentally ascribed the change to her engagement to Greaves Chamney.

XV

“My daughter: Mrs. Whittingham.”

It was in the hall of the New Gallery: they had just passed the turnstile: she was going out.

She was veiled, and in black. She gave an impression of discreet and exquisite sobriety, of a daintily intentional unobtrusiveness. Suavely smiling, she held out her hand.

“I’ve been wanting to know you so much.” She spoke with a naive, girlish candour. Admiration of her suppleness made him forget her adroitness in forcing his hand.

Hilda smiled vaguely. And she continued:

“You do not know, perhaps, how kind your father has been to me?”

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He blinked his eyes with that quick, almost imperceptible movement of his : he comprehended the bent of her impulse now, and met Hilda's glance of surprise with a faint, well-simulated gesture of protestation.

"Yes," she continued, still fluently smiling, and looking from one to the other, "I dare say he has never even spoken to you of me. He does good by stealth ; that is his way."

And full of impulsive, expectant gratitude, her eyes rested upon Eardley.

"I should be so pleased, Miss Lingard," she went on, turning again to Hilda, "if you would come to see me. Indeed your father has half promised he would bring you to tea on Saturday. May I count on you?"

"I am afraid I am going into the country on Saturday," Hilda answered, embarrassed.

"Ah ! I am sorry. Well, perhaps some other day he will bring you. Good-bye. . . . Good-bye, Lord Lingard. I am pertinacious, you see. I intend you to keep your promise."

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And still girlishly smiling, she turned back into the Gallery, fading away amid the crowd.

* * * * *

"How different she looks off the stage," Hilda remarked absently, as they moved round before the pictures. "You never told me that you knew her?"

He did not seem to hear: instinctively she postponed the topic.

* * * * *

An hour later, she reverted to it. Her father had gone off to keep some engagement; and Greaves, who had met them in the Gallery, was seated beside her.

They were talking fitfully, leisurely watching the crowd as it shifted before them.

"We met Mrs. Whittingham just now."

"Yes, I passed her as I came in."

"How pretty she is off the stage—so quiet and young-looking. Dad introduced me to her. I expected she'd be quite different. Have you seen her in the new piece?"

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"No, not yet."

"Dad's going to take me to see her.
She's very interesting, I should imagine."

"Yes, to men : not to women."

"What do you mean ?" she asked, looking up quickly.

"There are some women who are more attractive to men than to women, just as there are some men, whom men like, and women don't care for."

"Yes," she answered thoughtfully, "I see what you mean."

And they talked of other things.

XVI

AND Bessie, down at Tukenton, full of timorous apprehensions, brooded over Hilda's approaching marriage, till at last, little by little, there crept over her a bitter consciousness of the helplessness of her own isolation, till her life seemed to have grown altogether empty and tasteless.

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Not that she bore any resentment against Eardley: long ago had she learned to acquiesce in his attitude towards her. Only, feeling herself grown old, and surveying the past, trailing behind her in all its irrevocable inadequacy, she deplored the exceeding pity of it.

Ah ! how different it might have been. Ah ! why was it that it had not been different ? She thought of Hilda as a little child, dimpling her baby cheeks as she smiled, prattling confidentially as they played together. She recalled how eagerly she had planned the childish frocks ; how she had nursed her, watching by her bedside night after night. And now, and now, it was all forgotten ; it was as if it had never been. And the instinct of her maternity clamoured within her—after all, was not Hilda her child —of her own flesh and blood—had she not a right to her love, to demand it, to claim it ?

Yet now, now it was all forgotten : it was as if it had never been.

* * * * *

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If anything were to happen to her, perhaps Hilda would see it all then, perhaps then she would be sorry, would come back to her . . . perhaps? . . . perhaps? . . .

But in the autumn, after the wedding, she was going away—away to her own life in London. . . . She foresaw how henceforward they would drift altogether apart.

And Greaves Chamney, would he be good to her? Or, after a year or two, would it be as it had been with her and Eardley? . . .

She comprehended now how it was, as the years slipped by, that she had come to mean nothing to Hilda; how she had done wrong to isolate herself down here at Tukenton; not to have had the courage to face the life in London. . . .

. . . And yet the humiliation of it all—how could she have endured that?—living on in Belgrave Street, in that house which she had come to hate—there between Eardley and Bertha Mathurin?

And now, she suspected, there were others

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too. . . . An actress' name had been hinted to her. . . .

After all, this marriage must be the best thing—and then, perhaps, some day, Hilda would come to see things differently, to realize how harshly she had judged her mother, to understand her silent suffering all these years.

* * * * *

Yes, some day, it must all come right.

* * * * *

XVII

ALL the week she had been looking forward to taking Greaves down to Tukenton. Her father, these last days, had been but seldom at home ; and she was fast wearying of London crowds. She pictured herself strolling over the park with him, while he chatted to her wittily of their London acquaintances.

But, on the Saturday, almost as soon as they had arrived, Lady Whyte's blunt

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hostility towards him, and, more especially, her mother's obviously anxious curiosity concerning him, falsified all her expectations.

And he seemed ill-at-ease, almost *gauche*; and, on his behalf, she resented hotly the atmosphere that showed him at a disadvantage. She had been expecting that, by his cleverness, he would impose himself upon them : her mother's apprehensive observance of his manner wounded her pride.

Thus irksomely, but without incident, the two days passed.

* * * * *

On the Sunday evening, after dinner (Greaves had gone off to the smoking-room) Hilda and her mother sat alone in the library. For a while they chatted of trivialities. Then, abruptly, her mother began—

“I want you to tell me about your engagement, Hilda. You’ve never talked to me of it. What are your plans ?”

“I don’t know that there’s anything to

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tell. We're going to Paris for our honeymoon, and of course we shall live in London. I want to be as close to dad as possible."

"And you're very happy, darling? You're very fond of him?"

"Oh! I like him well enough or I shouldn't have accepted him. And dad's very pleased."

"But you yourself, Hilda. I want to know."

"Oh! that's all right. We shall jog along together all right, like every one else, I suppose."

"Hilda, I can't bear to hear you talk like that."

"Like what?"

"As if you didn't care—as if affection counted for nothing."

"How absurd you are, mother."

"You don't know what a loveless marriage means."

Hilda looked up, surprised at her mother's suddenly strained voice.

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Then, after a moment, she answered, laughing hardly—

“Oh ! it works now-a-days as well as anything else. Paul and Virginie’s all very well on a desert island, or in the remoter Midlands.”

“But he—he, at least, is in love with you ?”

“Yes, I suppose he is—he thinks so anyway. Men can believe anything of themselves.”

“Hilda, you don’t know how you’re making me suffer.”

“I’m sorry, mother ; but I can’t help it ; it isn’t my fault. It’s better to be frank.”

“Oh ! but you don’t know—you don’t understand.”

“I know the folly of working oneself up to a pitch of ridiculous illusions, and I know dozens of instances of common-sense marriages turning out admirably.”

“Hilda, I implore you—break this thing off—before it is too late. You don’t know

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what you're doing. Listen to me. I am your mother, after all."

"How absurd you are, mother. You see you don't understand me a bit. I realize exactly what I'm doing. I'm not a child. You don't suppose I've resolved upon this without due consideration. . . . Come, mother, don't give way like this. . . . There's no cause to make yourself unhappy. . . . Remember, 'nothing venture, nothing win.' Besides, we shall get on splendidly. In many ways we're simply admirably suited."

The door opened, and Lady Whyte appeared, wheeled in by the butler. Lady Lingard brushed her eyes with her handkerchief, and left the room hurriedly.

"What's the matter with your mother?" Lady Whyte asked sharply.

"She's been working herself into a state about my engagement. It's too absurd," Hilda retorted aggressively. "If only people would leave one alone," she added.

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"You don't care for this man, that's evident. You're only in a childish hurry to get married."

"That's all you know about it," Hilda retorted angrily.

"Don't be rude and lose your temper, but sit down and listen to me. Your conduct towards your poor mother is perfectly heartless. It would be quite abominable, if you weren't very young and very ignorant. I tell you, Hilda, you're behaving in a perfectly heartless way."

"And how, pray? I suppose because I wish to marry to please myself. Both you and mother have conceived a ridiculous and unreasonable dislike to Greaves. I really can't hold myself responsible for that."

"You're your father's child all over—a complacent egotist——"

"How dare you talk like that—how dare you say a word against dad?"

"Because it's high time you were brought

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to your senses, and that your eyes were opened, before you rush into this marriage. Sit down," the old lady called, "don't keep walking up and down the room like that. Sit down and, for once, listen to me."

Hilda obeyed sullenly.

"Your father's not fit to black Bessie's boots——"

"Really!" Hilda interrupted with a concentrated sneer.

"Has no reason ever occurred to you why your mother should live down here by herself——"

"London doesn't agree with mother—she doesn't care for society—she's essentially a country person. Besides——"

"Your mother lives down here because long ago your father's conduct made it impossible for her to live in London. For years he's been deceiving her——"

"How dare you talk like this, Aunt Caroline?——" Her voice rang through the room : she stood erect before the old woman's

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chair, her eyes flashing, her lips quite bloodless, her hands convulsively clenched.

"Yes, how dare I?" Lady Whyte retorted. "Because for years I've watched this abomination going on. I've seen your mother suffering and submitting in silent misery, till all her life and gladness has gone from her. Because I've seen you, who ought to have helped her, and been her great consolation, avoiding her, neglecting her, sneering at her. And I've seen Mrs. Mathurin, that brazen-faced woman, coming to the house, and your poor mother having to sit smiling between your father and her."

Hilda gripped her by the arm.

"It's a lie, it's a lie, an abominable lie."

And, breaking into a peal of hysterical laughter, slammed the door behind her.

XVIII

SHE turned the key in her bedroom door, threw open the window, and gazed a moment out into the night ; then, suddenly turning, flung herself upon the bed. She did these things deliberately, almost ostentatiously, as if some one were watching her. As yet, she was only conscious of an obscure sense that the scene, down-stairs in the library, resembled some hideous climax in a play.

For a long while she lay quite still, her eyes wide open. Aunt Caroline had been foully slandering her father, trying to poison her mind against him—the phrase rang feverishly through her brain, and its melodramatic quality thrilled her with a strange excitement.

Outside, in the blackness, the trees were rustling : beneath her window some of the maids were loudly laughing together.

And hurriedly, her heart filled full of a

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warm pity for her father—for his white, worn face. . . . She longed to go to him, to comfort him, . . . she longed to avenge him by some striking deed.

She closed her eyes, as if in sudden pain. . . . She must think the whole thing out, clearly, calmly—what was best for her to do. . . . If only she were a man, and Aunt Caroline were a man. . . . Dad—if only she could go back to him to-night. . . .

It was a lie, a lie, she told herself passionately . . . a lie, he was the very soul of honour . . . something must be done . . . Why had she done nothing, said nothing? . . . Why was she so alone?

She sprang up.

Greaves—she would go down to him in the smoking-room. . . .

No, but she couldn't—she couldn't speak to him of it. . . . Oh! but it was a lie . . . it must be a lie . . . dad, poor dad—how it would make him suffer if he knew. . . . Greaves would tell her at once that it was a

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lie . . . he would know what was best to be done.

Impulsively she fumbled with the lock and hurried down-stairs.

* * * *

He was lying in a big arm-chair, smoking a cigar, reading a French novel.

At the sight of her face he started, exclaiming—

“What’s the matter, Hilda?”

“I want to talk to you—to consult you. Something very terrible has just happened.” As she spoke, she became aware of her own concentrated calm, and of a half-formulated desire to act admirably.

And she began to walk up and down the room.

“It’s difficult to know how to tell you. . . . After dinner, Aunt Caroline and I were together in the library, and she began to say the most abominable things against dad—that the reason why mother always lives down here is because of Mrs. Mathurin—that—

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that dad's been behaving wickedly for years—that now—he's in love with some actress—Mrs. Whittingham, whom, you know, dad has helped, and been kind to——”

“Good God! She's been saying all that to you. . . . Is that all? Did she say anything else?”

“I wouldn't listen. I went up-stairs to my room.”

“Where was your mother?”

“She'd gone away. . . . I don't know. . . . I don't understand. . . . Aunt Caroline was furious with me.”

“But, explain, why was she furious?”

“She said I've been neglecting mother—I don't know—perhaps she was right. . . . She said that now I was going to be married, it was time my eyes were opened—those were her words.”

He threw his cigar across the room into the grate, and waited hesitatingly.

“You don't doubt him too?” she broke out. “You don't believe these abominable

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things? Do say something—speak. Say you don't believe them."

"No, no, how can you think such a thing," he answered hurriedly.

He came close to her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Hilda, I will see what's to be done. You must leave this matter in my hands absolutely. You must trust me. There's been some dreadful misunderstanding."

She was gazing at him doubtfully: gradually, his smooth, authoritative tone convinced her.

"What are you going to do?" she asked weakly.

"I shall see Lady Whyte."

"To-night?"

"Yes, to-night."

"What will you say?"

"I shall find out her motive for saying those things. I shall clear it all up absolutely."

"Father must never know——"

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"No, no, of course not," he answered hastily.

"Greaves, will you swear to me that it's not true—I'm only a girl : I don't understand things. But you know dad—you're a man of the world—you know that it's impossible—impossible that he could have behaved wickedly. Give me your word of honour, Greaves, and then I will obey you absolutely."

"There, Hilda, it isn't true—of course it isn't true."

"You give me your word of honour."

"I give you my word of honour," he repeated steadily. "And now you must go straight up to bed. You're worn out with excitement."

"Very well," she answered submissively. "Good-night. You don't know how you've comforted me. I trust you absolutely. And in the morning you'll tell me everything?"

"Yes, in the morning."

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She put her arms round his neck, and kissed him on the forehead, reverently.

* * * *

When she was gone, he lit a fresh cigar, and mused with a cheap, contemptuous cynicism on the blundering irony of life.

XIX

THEY were nearing London. Through the fog the wilderness of black slate roofs glimmered wanly: in the distance, like a monstrous, phantasmagoric fortress, some gasworks loomed. The train stopped, and Greaves, peering out, caught a glimpse below the viaduct of a double row of low-walled, brown brick houses—jaded creepers pushing their grimy greenery around the windows; slatternly women lounging in the doorways, troops of squalid children sprawling over the pavement. And for a moment he mused curiously on the degraded simplification of the lives of these creatures.

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He turned to Hilda. She had opened her eyes vaguely, but meeting his glance, closed them again. They were alone in the carriage—she pretending to sleep ; he, opposite watching her, busy conjecturing why, with a certain ostentation, she had throughout the journey avoided all reference to the episode of last night. After she had left him over a second cigar, he had decided that obviously his course was to stand by and watch the situation (which, despite its somewhat grotesque elements, struck him as quaintly pathetic) work itself out.

At the station, telling the footman to bring on her luggage, she hurried to the carriage, and drove away, bidding him a mechanical good-bye. He remained standing on the platform, gazing at the retreating brougham, and her expression, as he recalled it, seemed all at once to betoken the important impatience of some irksome resolve.

An accumulation of work absorbed him till the following afternoon, when, full of an

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ironical and expectant curiosity, he called at Belgrave Street.

From the butler he learned the news that Lord Lingard was seriously ill, that Lady Lingard had been telegraphed for, and was expected every moment.

He went into the library, and presently Hilda appeared. Her face was pale and worn, and the tired, tense look in her eyes accentuated, so he thought, her resemblance to her father.

He hastened towards her, making an ineffectual gesture to take both her hands in his. She repulsed him quite definitely.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Pneumonia, brought on by travelling back to London with a bad cold.” Her voice startled him. It was strangely deliberate and almost hard.

“He had gone out of town?”

“Yes. It appears that he went down to Maidenhead on Saturday to Mrs. Whitting-

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ham's, and came back yesterday with the fever on him."

"Mrs. Whittingham's?" he murmured.

Their eyes met. In the steadiness of her gaze he read the riddle of her stony composure.

"How is he now?" he asked mechanically.

"He's dozing. In the night he was very delirious."

"You look worn-out. Have you got a nurse?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"Mother will be here presently," she answered curtly.

"There's no danger?"

"Not immediately. . . . I think he will die."

"Good God!"

At that moment Mrs. Mathurin's voice sounded in the hall outside, excitedly questioning the butler, then asking to see Miss Lingard.

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Greaves, recovering himself, started towards the door to intercept her. But he was too late. She had pushed past him into the room.

"Hilda, tell me about this dreadful news. . . . What is the matter with him? . . . It can't be really pneumonia. . . . How did it happen? . . . He's not in danger?"

She spoke incoherently, in a rapid, husky whisper.

Hilda paused before answering, and her features stiffened.

"No, not at present."

"Who's attending him? What do the doctors say? Have you got proper nurses?"

"Everything is being done that can be done. I am expecting mother every minute." She spoke with icy fluency; then turning stiffly, left the room.

It was almost a minute before Mrs. Mathurin realized what had happened. Her eyes dilated: she caught at her breath, looking round the room with a helpless,

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frightened expression. Clutching at the table, she sank into a chair.

Greaves, who had been standing in the window, came towards her.

"Your arm . . . to my carriage, . . ." she gasped.

He led her to the brougham, and when she was inside, called to the coachman "Home."

And, as he walked away up the street, the Lingard carriage rolled past him. Through the closed window he caught a glimpse of Lady Lingard's indefinite profile.

XX

DURING his delirium he had been very violent, calling at intervals fiercely upon Bertha, and pleading with some other unknown woman. But the fever left him at last ; and now, quite lucidly, he was slowly dying, lying exhausted day after day, staring vacantly at the wall before him. His face

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was grown wizened like a very old man's : a ragged white beard disfigured his chin.

For nine days Bessie had scarcely left him. So habituated had she become to the subdued routine of the sick-room, that sometimes she wondered dully whether, in reality, she had not been living there during many months. And while the day-nurse watched by his bedside, she would take her place before the window, to gaze out at the houses opposite, to wait, strangely benumbed, for the end. . . .

The long afternoon faded into the dreary, evening twilight : she lost all consciousness of the present, and across the misty wilderness of the past her thoughts wandered stumbling. For hours, dazed as in a dream, she sat reviewing the past, till it was as if he were already gone, as if her life with him were already ended—a blurred, tangled tale, of which the last page was turned.

By and by, one by one, sprang up vivid memories of her childhood, of her girlhood,

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of her father, of her mother, of the little yellow house in the High Street at Oxford, of a hundred incidents that had long lain forgotten. And then of a sudden there crept over her, like a brutal interruption, the deadening sense that her father and mother were gone years and years ago, that the little yellow house was pulled down, that never, never could the old days come again ; and bitterly, silently, she cried to herself. . . .

And with a desperate, piteous persistence, she reverted to the memories of her youth.

* * * *

She turned, and at the sight of his tired, aged face, she remembered all the tireless activity of his life, and sat stupidly watching him, sullenly incredulous of the great change that had come over him.

She moved to the bedside and took the nurse's place. He was sleeping with one hand stretched across the coverlet towards her. He opened his eyes, and lay for a

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while looking at her feebly. The nurse had left the room ; he and she were alone. There was no sound but the hurried ticking of the clock, and the faint distant rumour of the traffic. A great yearning for a reconciliation welled up within her, a yearning to tell him how she forgave him ; to tell him how she had guessed how things were all these years ; how she had come to understand that she was not good enough for him ; how now that during those mad nights of his delirium she had learned the truth from his own lips, she found no blame for him in her heart. . . .

But he had closed his eyes again wearily.

She fell to thinking vaguely of the after-world. There, she imagined, the past would be made altogether clear ; there each would know the secrets of the other's heart. Then she would tell him of her forgiveness : then he would see how all these years she had come to understand.

And bending over the bed as he slept, she

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whispered to God to help him in hasty incoherent phrases.

* * * * *

Later, after the visit of the two doctors, from the nurse's manner she guessed that he would not survive the night ; and the sense of her own helplessness, face to face with the inexorableness of death, terrified her. She longed passionately for him to live, rebelling desperately against the horrible extinction of his being ; wildly, abjectly praying to God to spare him.

If only he would live. . . . Feverishly, piteously she pictured the details of a peaceful future—down at Tukenton ; he convalescent, she tending him with eager, unremitting care.

After midnight he fell asleep, and at the nurse's suggestion, she lay down to rest on the sofa by the window. An hour later the nurse woke her gently, and all at once she knew that the end was come. He had died quite peacefully in his sleep.

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She went up to the bed. He lay there, quite still, and so unchanged that the first sight of him caused her no shock. Then gradually she understood that it was not he, but his dead body that was stretched between the sheets, and she broke into a faint, frightened fit of sobbing.

* * * *

The door opened, and Hilda came in. She stood by the bedside, rigid, her face set. Then turned, and went without a word.

But Bessie was conscious of nothing, but of the whole irrevocable story of their common life trailing interminably across her mind—her own inadequacy, and his superiority to her—and as she sobbed, her heart was aching with an immense, a passionate pity for him.

XXI

THE day after the funeral Hilda went down to Tukenton with her maid. She told no

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one beforehand of her departure ; only left a scribbled note for her mother.

Every detail of the house in Belgrave Street, reminding her, as it did, of her father, had become hateful to her ; and, above all, her mother's presence—the constant sight of her patient expression of dumb suffering—was intolerable.

She longed imperiously to escape, to be alone with her own crowding thoughts.

* * * *

And, down at Tukenton, all day long she nursed the bitterness of her anguish. . . .

Since his death, she had never cried ; she felt no grief ; she was only embittered against the humiliation of the smirched memory he had left behind him.

Occasionally, this consciousness of her own hardness startled her : she made spasmodic and insincere efforts to soften towards him, while the keen remembrance of his words during that first night of his delirium

stung her incessantly to a fresh sense of her humiliation.

And realizing the overwhelming cruelty of her own deception, in self-pity she was moved almost to tears—how she had worshipped him, reverenced him, jealously excluded others from any share in her affection. Looking backwards, she saw him once more, as she had always seen him, a being set above the rest of the world, sacred, wonderful, almost mysterious, so that, often, in the presence of strangers, she had felt consciously proud of her familiarity with him. . . .

. . . Oh ! why had she learned to believe in these things—in honour that was a society fashion, in fidelity that meant ceremonious deceit? . . . Bitterly she recalled how, in her shallow folly, she had proclaimed that marriage was a mere arrangement ; how, in her pretentious ignorance, she had scoffed at her mother's old-fashioned ideas; how she had once complacently pitied a girl-acquaintance, whose father had disgraced himself,

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and been forced to escape abroad. And, remorselessly, she railed at herself, at the miserable mockery of her former pride. . . .

For her father she had found no indulgence ; for her mother she felt no sympathy —only a vague artificial pity. Little by little she came to comprehend that her mother's inadequacy had been the cause of his treachery ; that, inferior to him intellectually, she had proved no help-mate to him in the time of his struggle for success ; that she had made no effort ; that, weakly, she had abandoned him, to live alone, and apart from him, and that, later, she had known ; and *she had acquiesced*. . . .

Her past, too, had been ignominious ; she, too, had been content to live a lie.

* * * *

Thus, blindly, in her pain, she probed the hollowness of her former unquestioning faith, till she had gauged the whole gaping extent of its mockery. Then, shivering, she seemed to see the whole world tainted—men

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and women evil-hearted, inwardly contemptuous of honour, glibly smiling, preserving a smooth, decorous demeanour. And at intervals, the rhythmically recurring consciousness that he, her own father, who had been everything to her, all her life, had lived ignobly with the rest ; that his memory would remain irretrievably soiled, stunned her into a dull, a leaden despair.

* * * * *

One evening, her thoughts reverted constantly to Greaves Chamney ; she realized that, somehow, his figure had become altogether repulsive ; that she mistrusted him definitely. She sat down to write to him, and found a momentary, hurried relief in a deliberate rupture of their engagement.

And, by and by, there arose within her a weary yearning after goodness ; a burning remorse for the empty, useless egoism of her former self ; and an impulsive impatience to devote herself in some striking way to the service of others—to become a hospital

nurse ; to work among the poor ; to relieve suffering ; to do good, to be surrounded by gratitude and love.

* * * *

XXII

THE house in Belgrave Street was to be sold ; in the future they were to be considerably poorer. Bessie came down to Tukenton, and resumed listlessly the tranquil routine of her old life. She appeared aged, and not a little enfeebled : her daily stock of strength seemed altogether scanty.

Old Lady Whyte was away at Bath : the mother and daughter were alone. But they lived apart, meeting only at meal-times, when Hilda's greeting would express a certain perfunctory and shallow solicitude.

Yet, sometimes, during the restless broodings of sleepless nights, forcing herself to contemplate the long years of her mother's suffering, and the bitter part that her own

harsh attitude had contributed, with a sudden spasm of compassionate contrition, she seemed to perceive herself grown heartless ; caring for no one ; incapable of affection—a personification of withered egoism. And, touched by the consciousness of her own misery, she sobbed to herself, and resolved that, in the morning, she would start to comfort her mother with uncommon tact.

Nevertheless, she continued, day after day, to shrink from the effort of a movement of tenderness, till, little by little, their estrangement stiffened, attained the rigidity of an unbroken habit. It was as if an intangible and unsurmountable barrier had grown up between them.

And now, an aching longing for her dead father crept over her—a gnawing grief ; an incessant, hopeless despair, when she remembered his dead, still face ; when she remembered that he was gone for ever—that never, never would she see him again. . . . And sullenly, to herself, she would insist that she

could never forget that her mother had been to blame ; that his dishonour had, in great measure, been her mother's fault. A stubborn, half-stifled rancour smouldered within her ; and the mere approach of her mother's figure recalling in a rush the ugly, crowding memories became hateful. She took to devising hasty excuses for reducing their meetings ; to avoiding her almost deliberately.

* * * *

So time flitted past. By and by it was as if her mother had come to acquiesce in the bare formality of their daily intercourse, for she, too, seemed to shrink from any attempt at intimacy, living on, day after day, vacantly brooding, talking but seldom, dully contented with the regular round of her small, monotonous occupations.

One evening Hilda, with some embarrassment, abruptly announced that she had broken off her engagement. A long, uncomfortable pause followed ; then her mother

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replied coldly—"I am very glad, Hilda, you know I never liked him."

And henceforward, somehow, the girl felt happier. Her prickings of conscience grew rarer, and finally the thought of her mother ceased to cause her uneasiness. Her own attitude no longer seemed to need justification; and she became reconciled to the constant sight of the enigmatic figure. . . .

XXIII

TWICE she caught a glimpse of Stephen Walsh, riding in the distance. One morning, at the corner of the village, she met him face to face, and he turned and walked back with her to the gates.

He asked her for news of her mother, referring gently to her grief, betraying, beneath a distant discretion, his profound personal admiration for her father. And comprehending quickly that it had been impossible for his frank, upright nature to view him

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otherwise, all at once her eyes filled full of tears, and she looked up at him in impulsive gratitude. . . .

. . . Thenceforward, little by little, they came to resume a semblance of their old friendship. He used to join her when she rode with her groom, and together they used to wander through the lanes. They talked often of her father: she encouraged him to remind her that he had suspected nothing; the continual pretence that she, too, sorrowed reverently, soothed her.

And, instinctively, she took refuge, as it were, in the loyal simplicity of his nature: she let him lead their conversations, assenting to his opinions almost timidly. At first this was merely the mechanical subservience of exceeding fatigue; but insensibly, as she listened while he related his reminiscences of the hunting-field, or explained his practical projects for the improvement of his property, or his plans for the bettering of the labourer's lot, a great, confiding respect for him

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penetrated her. She imagined how, at every turn in his life, it had been easier for him to do right than to do wrong : dimly she divined his unfamiliarity with evil ; that the simple virtues—truth and loyalty, patience, chivalry and courage—were his, as naturally as his physical strength. In his presence she never perceived how strangely her former assertiveness had faded : his naïve enjoyment of his occupations, his placid love of his life, dominated her.

Thus, the reaction that was at work within her, caused her to brood dreamily on his personality, while her gratitude towards him led her to shrink instinctively from a fresh recognition of those defects of his, which before she had definitely recognized, and to drift, in unconscious insincerity, into a forced admiration of those qualities, which seemed to her but just lately revealed. When she recalled her former attitude towards him—her shallow, thoughtless contempt—she felt ashamed.

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Passively, she let him absorb her ; and because at this crisis in her life she found his companionship restful, she deluded herself into the belief that she would always need him, as she needed him now ; into a random assumption of the permanence of her own constraint.

That he would never change, she foresaw ; and that, if she married him, he would love her submissively, unquestioningly, with the unswerving fidelity of a faithful mastiff. She would be able to trust him implicitly ; and without further probing of her feelings towards him, weakly she urged herself into imagining how life with him would be altogether secure, peaceful ; into visioning long years of suave and sunny repose. . . .

And her memories of the time of her engagement to the other, grew all blurred, shadowy, unreal. His figure faded from her mind, she forgot him easily, as one forgets a chance acquaintance.

XXIV

SLOWLY the prospect of his great happiness dawned upon him.

During that long series of dreary days, through which he had lived mechanically—resolutely, by means of a hundred improvised occupations, endeavouring to oust her image from his mind—not once had he accused her of insincerity, of trifling thoughtlessly with his love. For the fact that she could not care for him, he had blamed only himself—his own dulness, his own clumsiness, his own obvious inferiority. He bore his heart-burnings with an uncomplaining, dogged stolidity; still stubbornly hoping, after his unreasoning instinctive fashion.

But when, for the first time, he met her again, the warm thrill of gladness at being once more beside her, caused him instantaneously to forget the sullen jealousy, the compressed anguish of spirit, with which these

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last weeks he had been battling : in his impulsive eagerness to be of use to her in her grief, in his sorrow at her sorrow, the whole bitter memory of the scene of his rejection faded from his mind. Pale, grave, changed in manner—grown older he tentatively judged —more beautiful, certainly, than she had ever appeared before, far away, enshrined, as it were, in the mystery of suffering, to long for her then, to start to rebuild his shattered hopes of winning her, would have seemed a sacrilege. Away from her, he thought of little else : her image was ever present : he brooded over her passionate love for her father, and her broken spirit seemed to him infinitely piteous. Thus timorous of his own awkwardness, he approached her with exceeding reverence, puzzling how best to cheer her, wondering laboriously how best he could help her to forget. . . .

One afternoon they sauntered home, side by side, in silence, along the white high road.

He had almost forgotten her, musing to

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himself on each familiar landmark, dreamily listening to the distant, floating hum of the reaping machines, or to the soft rustle of the beech trees, all spangled with silver in the summer sunlight, or watching the lazy rippling of the swelling, golden fields.

At the gates they stopped, and suddenly realizing his taciturnity, he said ruefully—

“ I’m so sorry ; I’m afraid I’ve been more stupid than usual this afternoon.”

She took his hand to wish him good-bye, and answered gravely—

“ No, you are not stupid ; you are kind : I shall never be able to thank you.”

And spurring her horse, she trotted up the avenue, towards the house.

He rode slowly home, moved by a profound protecting pity for her, for the solitude of her mourning, which now he comprehended more vividly than he had done before.

Throughout the evening, flushed with simple happy pride, he repeated to himself those parting words of hers—“ I shall never

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be able to thank you." More than ever was he conscious of his own inferiority : the very fact that he had been able to comfort her a little seemed to accentuate the contrast between them, while the delicious sense that she had confided herself to him, allowed him, as it were, to protect her, and the thought that now, at this very moment perhaps, she was thinking of him with gratitude, set all his old love aflame.

All the next day the rain fell in torrents : to ride with her was impossible, and to call, without an adequate excuse, would, he feared, have seemed an intrusion. So he killed the long hours of the afternoon tramping across the slushy fields, methodically recapitulating fragments of their conversations, recalling chance changes of her tone, of her expression, argumentatively reconstructing a fresh fabric of hope.

On the morrow, he waited for her at the gates as usual ; and when she appeared talked to her in a strained fashion, of the weather,

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of the damage done to the harvest by the rain. Her manner had relapsed into her former indifference, so that he almost felt a doubt whether that moment of their last parting had not after all been but a mad fabrication of his fancy. Then at the sight of her pale still face, he stifled his disappointment resolutely, impulsively respectful of her grief.

The days went by ; and he continued to hope patiently. And, little by little, the daily renewal of her familiarity, and the persistent recollection of that one phrase of hers, "I shall never be able to thank you," bred at last within him a deep-rooted confidence, an indefinite yet secure trust in her, and lent to these first weeks of autumn the glow of a mysterious joy. Every night he imagined the coming of some signal opportunity of revealing to her his devotion : often in his dreams, he visioned himself gladly giving up his life for her sake. And, looking forward into the future, to the unending happiness of

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having her by his side, he spent hours in devising golden projects for her delight.

XXV

HE helped her to dismount. The groom held the horses, and they entered the church. It was an ancient, picturesque building, with a square, ivy-clad tower. As they had ridden through the village, she had observed that the door was ajar, and had suggested that they should go inside.

“How new and uninteresting!” she exclaimed. “It’s been all restored and quite spoilt.” They stood together beside one of the stuccoed pillars. With his hat in his hand he scrutinized the ceiling vaguely: then his gaze reverted to her. Presently she became aware that his eyes were fixed upon her, and turning towards him, laughed a little nervously.

“I wonder if one can get on to the top of the tower,” she asked.

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He found a side-door at the end of the aisle ; and they mounted a worn, winding stone staircase. The roof of the tower had been newly overlaid with zinc : they crossed it, and leaned together over the parapet.

A tribe of sparrows, undisturbed by their presence, were boisterously twittering in the ivy : beneath, on the ridge of a thatched cottage a cat sat crouched in ambush : a four-wheeled waggon, laden with corn, was toiling up the hill ; the cracking of the carter's whip was carried past them on the breeze ; and beyond, the plain lay spread—a wide, undulating patchwork of gold and green, peopled here and there by huddled groups of white-faced hamlets. The sky was cloudless—an empty vault of vast pale blue.

He pointed out to her in the distance the red chimneys of Tukenton, and further, away to the left, Courtlands, where he lived, half-hidden in the trees.

After a while he ceased speaking. She stayed dreamily surveying the country side,

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mapped out before her, marvelling how intimately it all seemed to have grown associated with him, forming, as it were, the natural background of his figure. Absently she fancied that, in time, she would come to love it, too, in all its detail, as he loved it, with a tranquil, deep-rooted affection.

"It is very beautiful," she murmured, half to herself.

And, prompted by a sudden impulse, she lifted her hand and laid it across his.

"You will be very good to me," she said gently.

He did not move, though she looked up expectantly into his face; only his grasp tightened slowly upon hers.

"You do care for me, after all——?" he whispered.

For several minutes he remained silent, holding her hand in his, awkwardly caressing the fingers. She watched a horde of rooks, journeying homewards across the valley, cawing one to another, high in the sky, and

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she told herself, slowly, gravely, how she had given herself to him irrevocably.

And concerning the future, as she gazed out across the landscape, bathed in the full glare of the autumn sun, she wondered, doubtfully, hastily stifling a spasm of hesitating apprehension.

Then brusquely reminding herself of his natural goodness, of the sure faithfulness of his love, she repeated—

“How beautiful it is ! I shall be so happy.”

“No, no,” he answered quickly. “We will travel : we will live in London : I have thought it all out.”

“You are wonderful,” she said simply.

He laughed, a quick, happy laugh, and looked into her eyes. His lips moved impulsively as if he were about to speak.

And they remained still standing together, leaning over the parapet, hand in hand ; she watching curiously the odd, flickering smile that transfigured his face. Vague visions of new countries flitted before her—of snow,

peaked mountains, of deep-blue lakes, of ruined Italian cities — filling her with a feverish impatience to have done with the past, to begin the future. . . . And once more reminding herself, almost triumphantly, of his natural goodness, of the sure faithfulness of his love, she foresaw herself maintaining with ease her present attitude towards him, continuing always contented by his side.

And her confidence in his stability led her to realize in a flash, that he would prove in no way exacting, and that she would be able, without difficulty, to conceal from him that she did not care for him, as he cared for her, while she fondly fancied that, in time, perhaps, she would change ; that under the influence of his companionship she would grow to resemble him. . . .

He came nearer to her, as if to kiss her : she drew back hastily, exclaiming—

“We must go down. The horses will be getting chilled, and Hedges will be wondering what has happened.”

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